

Sarasa Nagase

Illustrator **Hatipisuwan**





Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[EPISODE 1](#)

[EPISODE 1.5](#)

[EPISODE 2](#)

[EPISODE 2.5](#)

[EPISODE 3](#)

[EPISODE 3.5](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

EPISODE 1

“Don’t make a fuss—just get out of here.”

“Very well. I shall.”

“Eh?”

As her interlocutor goggled at her, Octavia looked back quizzically. He had told her to get out, and so what sense was there in being shocked when she agreed? Octavia’s travel bags, coat, hat, and other items, which she had often taken from her room when going out in the past, lay scattered in the marble hallway at the entrance to the Earl of Reine’s manor. They had just been thrown down there from the top of the staircase. She wondered if it had really been necessary to throw things, but she was also relieved that they had saved her the trouble of doing her own packing. Octavia had been thinking that it was about time for her to be going. She hadn’t expected things to progress this far the day after her grandmother’s funeral, but from her family’s perspective, this had been a long time coming.

Picking up her caramel-colored coat, Octavia spoke to a servant standing by the wall in the entrance hall, who had held his breath while watching the scene unfold.

“Did you put the dress my grandmother gave me in my luggage?”

“Y-Yes. You’ll find three nights’ worth of clothes and other essentials.” He paused. “Err, that’s all I could prepare.”

“That’s fine. Thanks. You’ve been a great help.”

“I-Is this... all right?” someone asked gingerly from the top of the staircase. Octavia looked up curiously at her family, who looked back down at her. On the landing at the top of the split staircase stood Octavia’s half sister; Octavia’s former suitor, who had his arm around her sister’s shoulder; and Octavia’s own father. *Could they, in fact, be worried about me?*

“It’ll be fine. Don’t worry about her,” spat her former suitor venomously, after

making an expression of such astonishment that one might think he had been poisoned himself. He was the very man who had directed Octavia to get out. He spoke to her now: “Don’t be so conceited as to imagine that we’d worry about *you*. A daughter like you ill befits the noble house of Reine. Now that I have married into this family, I have decided that you can no longer remain part of it.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Th-The Earl of Reine has said himself that he merely adopted you at the behest of the previous earl’s wife, despite knowing nothing of your background.”

“Oh? To call my grandmother the previous earl’s *wife* is not quite right. My grandmother was the previous *earl*. And although it’s true that my grandmother was very fond of me, you’re wrong to claim that my background was unknown. You just don’t want to acknowledge that my mother was a servant, with whom my father had carried on an affair in his younger days.”

“Octavia! Watch your tongue!” Octavia’s father flushed crimson with anger, but this scandal was well-known. Not only was everyone in the manor aware of it, but most likely everyone in the earl’s realm knew.

While engaged to the daughter of a noble household, Octavia’s father—the prodigal son of his own household—had conducted an affair with a servant girl prior to his marriage. This had produced his eldest daughter, Octavia. Since the servant girl belonged to a lower class, Octavia’s father had thought that he could readily sever their relationship with a financial settlement. He may have been her father, but Octavia thought this was despicable.

The final straw had been the revelation that the Reine household had been given special dispensation at the founding of the Kingdom of Angelus, allowing female members to be recognized as full peers under the title of earl. Octavia’s father had been under the false impression that her grandmother had been called the Earl of Reine as a proxy for her deceased husband, Octavia’s grandfather. Until very recently, no one had realized that “the previous Earl of Reine” referred to Octavia’s grandmother, and now they looked so foolish that Octavia couldn’t even be angry at them. She felt sorry for them.

“Father, it’s a little late to try and hide it. Everyone knows already.”

“J-Jessie is my only daughter! I’ve never thought of you as my daughter, not even once!”

“Please rest assured, I’ve never once thought of you as my father either. My grandmother was the one who raised me. However, for the sake of convenience, I can find no term of address more suitable than ‘Father,’ so please excuse me for using it.”

“Y-Y-You...” Octavia’s father could only open and close his mouth in response to Octavia’s apology. Perhaps he was having trouble getting enough oxygen.

Standing beside him, Octavia’s half sister frowned and interjected, “Sister, don’t say such unhappy things.” Octavia’s half sister, with her tidy countenance, had a voice like a small bird chirping, which was pleasing to the ear.

“Jessie, I’m really not so unhappy.”

“I know that. I must say, I really am sorry about what happened with Edward.” Jessie looked up at Octavia’s former suitor, Edward, who still had his arm around her shoulder. Edward met her gaze, then placed his cheek against Jessie’s forehead.

“Put your mind at ease, Jessie. All along, I was only supposed to have been courting the daughter of the House of Reine. His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince, who sent me here, never specified Octavia by name.”

“But our grandmother intended for my sister to inherit this house.”

“That was because she believed to the last that Octavia was properly descended from the House of Reine, was it not? The House of Reine may hold special dispensation allowing women to inherit the title of earl, but it’s not as if they would disregard lineage. Since we are only correcting her mistake, I am sure your grandmother would not object.”

Of course, thought Octavia, *my grandmother will never say anything ever again.* Octavia’s grandmother, who had given her more attention and love than anyone else in the family, had died abruptly two days earlier.

Octavia’s last sight of her grandmother, lying in the coffin, still didn’t seem

real to her. Remembering her kind face, resplendent with makeup; the wedding ring still on her finger; the leisurely strides she took when walking through her garden; her voice, which made you want to share your secrets with her... It felt like at any moment she might emerge from the room in the back and reproach the family for this quarrel: “Are you all still at it?” This daydream felt much more real to Octavia than her death. *Don’t despair.* How many times had she said that to Octavia?

Octavia’s grandmother had said that she would definitely die first; Octavia must not die before her. That was why she had taught Octavia so many things, and why they had made so many promises, like what to do in the event that she inherited the title of Earl of Reine. Or, indeed, what to do if she were driven out of her home.

No one can choose the circumstances of their birth. If one can be so easily disowned, one shouldn’t speak too highly of family, lineage, or *noblesse oblige*. *Therefore, to avoid misfortune, live in hiding with confidence. That will be what grants you your freedom.*

“To allow you to stay here any longer would be tantamount to plotting against the Royal Family of Angelus. Her Highness the Queen has already acknowledged that I will be the next Earl of Reine. Those documents allowing a woman to inherit a peerage are outdated. An element of discord like you can only bring calamity upon this family in the future,” said Edward.

“It was the Royal Family of Angelus that created those outdated documents. Are you sure you want to say that? Won’t Princess Eliza be cross with you?”

“Do you expect me to recoil at the sound of my sister’s name?!” When he shouted like that, it was obvious that Edward was scared. But Eliza was the most distinguished of all of the Queen’s forty-seven children, the princess that most agreed should be the next to ascend to the throne. Octavia’s grandmother had also said that the princess possessed bottomless political ambition. Her youngest brother, Edward, must have had a hard time. Octavia deliberately didn’t press the topic. Showing that much kindness was important.

“I will simply say this to Her Majesty the Queen—that the woman known as

Octavia was not suitable for the House of Reine, that my sister's judgment was clouded!" declared Edward.

"Don't tell me you wanted so badly to disparage your sister to your mother that you withdrew your proposal to me? However you look at it, that's terribly short-sighted."

"I don't wish to be lectured by someone like you, who cannot even behave like a lady. I favored you because you had my sister's concern, but there was a limit to the disappointment I was willing to put up with."

"I was a disappointment. I can only apologize. For my part, I thought you were a good fellow."

Edward sneered at Octavia's response. "Now you're trying to flatter me?"

"No. I really did think you were a good, honest fellow. Even though you were forty-third in line—the youngest prince—you came here begrudgingly to seek your bride, wondering why you had to come to a lowly earl's house. Then, after frowning upon me, you looked at Jessie with stars in your eyes. Even my grandmother burst out laughing. She said you'd struggle to live in the Royal Palace like that."

"Do you mean to insult me?!"

"I'm not trying to insult you. I thought you might not be a bad man to have children with."

Edward was startled and deflated.

Octavia's father shouted, his face turning red, "So you *are* plotting something, aren't you, Octavia?!"

"But I made a promise to my grandmother," Octavia went on. "I promised that I would only have children with a man I truly loved. Therefore, I can only apologize to you."

"Why are you apologizing to me?!"

"Because I find you lacking," declared Octavia, staring Edward squarely in the eye. She thought she heard him gasp.

Practically foaming at the mouth, her father cried, "H-H-How can you show a

prince such discourtesy?!”

Restraining their furious father, Jessie cried, “Octavia, what do you intend to do? I’ll work to convince Edward and our father to let you stay. You need only say that you will relinquish your claim to the peerage!”

“Don’t worry. I can go to the Royal Capital, where our grandmother left me a mansion. Princess Eliza also told me to call on her, should something like this happen.”

“Eh?” Octavia’s father made an idiotic noise, her former suitor’s face stiffened, and her half sister frowned. She didn’t know what they were all still worrying about, but it was public knowledge that the mansion in the Royal Capital had been left to Octavia, and that she had become acquainted with Princess Eliza through her grandmother.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.” Octavia left behind her peerage, her former suitor, and her family without regrets. Picking up her bags and her hat, still strewn across the floor, she turned toward the front door, her back to her family.

“Wai—”

She was not interested in knowing who had finally raised their voice to stop her. Octavia strode confidently out the door, then adjusted her grip on her luggage. The weather was fine outside. She stretched both hands out toward the blue sky.

“I can’t believe they really kicked you out,” a voice piped up. It came from the hat Octavia clasped to her chest. Bright red, triangular eyes and a zig-zag mouth appeared upon it. He had been her partner since before she could remember. She had heard that “Hat,” as she called it, was a name she had learned not only before “Father,” naturally, but before even “Grandmother.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised, Hat. This is exactly what Grandmother predicted. Didn’t you also bet that I’d be kicked out?”

“I guess. But to think they *really* kicked you out,” sighed Hat. “Not only are they after the title, but they’re probably about to start dividing up your Granny’s inheritance. On the day after the funeral... They’re a pack of hyenas.”

“I thought that we’d at least have another week or so left, too.” There had

certainly been no outpouring of emotion. She recalled her grandmother once saying, “Well, there’s no time to waste on crying,” and smiling.

“How foolish they are! They haven’t realized that the true inheritance of the House of Reine is *me*, in my omniscience and omnipotence,” declared Hat.

“Well I’m no longer suited to be the earl’s daughter, so this is perfect. Grandmother always said that times would change. That one might be much freer without any titles at all.” As Octavia walked, she shook the dust from Hat. If she treated him too roughly, he would complain; but to regular people, Hat looked like a normal piece of headwear. They could not see his eyes or mouth, nor hear his voice. There were people around them at this very moment, but no one looked at them strangely.

“So, what are you going to do now?” asked Hat.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to fulfill my promise to my grandmother.”

“How exactly do you plan to do that?”

“I’ll go to the Royal Capital, follow in my grandmother’s footsteps, and become a detective!”

Hat stretched himself out and spoke in a beguiling voice. “I don’t think a good-for-nothing like you is qualified to be a detective,” he sighed, “but, well, Eliza will probably give you a hand. Most of all, with our powers combined, we can do anything. Detective work is a perfect profession for those who are seeking something, after all. Shall we obediently follow Granny’s plan, then?”

“I also need to look for a husband. I do need to have children, you know.”

“Yes, that is also part of your duty, but do you have to say it like that? Just say you want to get married. You’re still only a maiden of seventeen, right?”

“I know. But before I get married, I want to try being deceived by the sort of bad men my grandmother told me about. That seems to be an essential experience for becoming a good woman.”

“Even though I am all-knowing and all-powerful, I’m really starting to worry about what awaits us.” Hat seemed weary, but Octavia found herself with a spring in her step. The cobblestone path, bordered by flower beds, led directly

to the main street in town. She would grab a carriage there, and then head to the station on the outskirts of town. She was pretty sure she would find a vehicle called a steam locomotive there. If she booked a trip there she would arrive at the Royal Capital. The steps her grandmother had told her to take were etched on her heart. Beyond that was a world Octavia knew nothing about, but she had no choice but to stand up straight and carry on.

“By the way, what’s your idea of a bad man?”

Replacing Hat on her head, Octavia replied, “The kind of villain who schemes to overthrow the world?”

“Promise me you won’t get involved with anyone like that!” cried Hat. Octavia laughed and told him it was a joke.

“The only empty seats are in first class?”

“That’s right. Today’s train only has one private compartment for two left. Please accept my apologies.”

“Wh-What about tomorrow?”

“Every seat on tomorrow’s train has already been taken by reservations alone. There will be a vacancy in second class...in half a month.”

“Half a month?!”

“The travel season is almost upon us. I’m very sorry.” With the attendant at the ticket counter bowing his head to her, Octavia shook her head anxiously and left. The large station platform was crowded with people coming and going: gentlemen standing on the platform, women seeing them off, children waving to the steam train, station attendants carrying luggage, and many others. So that she wouldn’t get in the way of hurried passengers, Octavia retreated to a corner and touched the white brim of her hat.

“Why don’t you just take the compartment? You have money, don’t you?” Hat asked from atop Octavia’s head, looking for all the world like a regular bonnet.

Octavia gave this some thought.

“That’s true, but thinking of what’s to come...” In the Royal Capital was the mansion Octavia’s grandmother had left her before her death, and although it was somewhere to live, she could not afford to live in luxury. Furthermore, the steam train she was trying to board was the first long-distance, overnight train in the kingdom. Naturally the fare was on the expensive side. If she purchased a private, first-class compartment, the kind used by aristocrats, it would be more expensive still.

Nevertheless, if she waited half a month for a vacancy to open in second class, she would have to pay for accommodation in the meantime. That definitely wouldn’t be cheap, either. Since boarding the train right now would get her to the Royal Capital in just one night and two days, the time and money that it would cost to wait didn’t seem worth it. Half a month in the capital should be enough time to establish her detective agency.

“Still, it would be nice if there were a cancellation in second class, with the cheaper bunk beds...”

“Aren’t the rooms in second class shared between men and women? Whatever your family might say, you are a lady of the House of Reine— No, you’re an even nobler woman than that. I won’t let you sleep in the same room as a man of unknown character.”

“You may say that, but sacrifices must be made.”

“Don’t we have a tool somewhere that can conceal part of the train, along with the space in between?”

“Hat, please don’t suddenly suggest a plan that might get us caught by inquisitors.”

“Outside of the capital, their lot don’t tend to travel by train.”

“Out of my way!” A loud voice from behind tore through their surreptitious conversation. The sounds of commotion and agitation mingled with screams and the whinnies of horses. A man wearing a hat pulled down low over his eyes pushed aside some children and a lady holding a parasol as he ran toward the train platform.

“Thief! There he is!”

“Guards! Seize him!”

“Blast!” The man clicked his tongue, struggling to slip past the crowd of people. Then his eyes met Octavia’s. A knife flashed in the sun. The man suddenly yanked Octavia toward him and held her there tightly; she could only blink in surprise. His blade glinted at her throat. Hat, who had fallen to the ground as the man grappled with Octavia, muttered, “To think misfortune would strike again, and so early in our journey...”

“If you value this woman’s life, stay back!” The guards who had been pursuing the man stopped in their tracks, then formed a semicircle around him, still maintaining their distance. Wrapping one arm around Octavia’s neck, the man brandished the point of his knife at the onlookers. He seemed to be laughing. “G-Good. Get the train ready! Chase off everyone on board, except for the conductor!”

“What to do?” Hat mused. “Out of the tools currently in my index, the most useful would be... Weapons would draw too much attention. Something inconspicuous... Ah, how about the sewing kit? If you prick his finger, you can probably get away.”

Octavia turned her head as a calm voice broke into the tense scene. It came from beyond the guards and onlookers. “Let us accept your demands. In exchange, won’t you let the young lady go?”

“Marquis Osvard, it’s dangerous. Please stay behind us.”

“He has a hostage. If I, the victim, don’t negotiate with the criminal, we will not gain his trust.” Pushing past the guards, a young man emerged. As he did so, he doffed his gentleman’s hat in greeting. His silky, lustrous blond hair flowed in the sea breeze. His almond-shaped eyes looked sharp, but the expression around his eyes was cool, and his smile was soft. In the middle of the crowd on the platform, his posture was especially straight, as if he were standing in wait at a ballroom dance. It gave him a sense of refinement.

The women who had contorted their faces in fear of the ruffian holding Octavia hostage until a moment ago, and even the thief himself, were motionless, as if enchanted by this youth.

He was a beautiful young man. Still, Octavia frowned in spite of herself. *Who*

is he? A con man? Underneath his sophisticated black frock coat, he wore a fashionable checkered waistcoat. His shirt-collar was fastened with a wine-red necktie, and he wore leather boots in a caramel color. There was nothing in his dress to concern her. On the contrary, in attire, he was the perfect image of a nobleman. Even so, something didn't sit right with Octavia.

"I don't intend to take back the wallet you stole from me. I shan't pursue you, either. So, please, see that you release the young lady."

"H-How am I supposed to believe that?"

Indeed. With those long eyelashes that cast such languorous shadows, something about the man's expression seemed forced, Octavia realized. The look of concern he turned on Octavia was too beautiful. It looked contrived.

"I'm telling the truth. I have no need for it. I'm giving it to you."

"N-No need, you say?" The thief repeated, his voice trembling. He must have sounded shocked to those around him. But Octavia could tell from the strength exerted by the man's arms that the gentleman wasn't negotiating with the thief—he was taunting him. Handing his cane to one of the guards, the youth approached the thief, his arms spread, the heels of his leather boots clicking against the ground. He seemed to be signaling that he held no weapons and had no hostility. All the same, he left not even the slightest opening for the thief. The bemused half-moons of his hazel eyes accompanied a sneering grin.

"Quite. I'll give you as much as you like. That will be the price of your life."

"Why, you...!"

"Stop, or your life will end," Octavia warned the thief in a low voice. The man lifted his foot in preparation to throw his knife at the youth when she lightly swept his leg aside. The man gasped as he lost his balance, and she ducked low and escaped his grasp as she pushed him over.

"Hey, now's your opportunity. Grab him!" The guards hurried over to the man and held him down. To everyone else, it must have looked as if the thief had stepped forward too quickly in a fit of anger, tripped, and fallen over.

"Well, if that's all there was to it, then it was hardly worth our getting involved," said Hat.

“I hope that’s all.” Octavia picked up the unusually prideful Hat. The people around them still had their hands full, resolving the incident. It would’ve been best to leave while the crowd was still scattered in confusion. If she were asked for a statement, she’d be stuck here a while longer.

But then a hand was offered to Octavia, right before her eyes. “Are you hurt in any way, young lady?” It was the aristocratic youth from before. With the sun at his back, she couldn’t read his expression. Octavia was hesitant, but she felt that ignoring him would only lead to more trouble, so she tentatively put her hand in his. Upon doing so, she was yanked to her feet. “I’m terribly sorry that you were caught up in that.”

“No, I’m fine.” As he apologized, Octavia tried to pull her hand away from the youth, frowning, then stopped. She couldn’t pull away.

“It would seem I was so focused on finally returning to the Royal Capital that I let my guard down,” he went on. “How embarrassing.”

“Aha... Um, your hand.”

“You certainly kept a level head throughout that ordeal. Do you have some knowledge of martial arts?”

Octavia’s eyes narrowed. *Was he able to follow my movements? Well, I did think he wasn’t one to be trifled with...* Her first impression of him was that of a con man. What was more, no matter how hard she tugged, he would not let go of her hand. Without any recourse, she left her hand where it was and answered him.

“I learned the basics from my grandmother, for self defense.”

“From your grandmother? A woman? How unusual. Was she a soldier? A knight, perhaps? Or possibly a police officer?”

“None of those. My grandmother only said that she had learned it because her line of work demanded it.”

“In that case, might you be the daughter of the House of Reine?”

“How did you know?” Octavia, without thinking, answered him directly.

The youth narrowed his eyes gently and smiled. “From your attire and your

belongings, anyone might have concluded that you were the daughter of a wealthy household. And you were standing near the ticket counter, holding a large trunk. If you were looking to board a train right now, it would have to be the overnight train, bound for the Royal Capital. All this means that you are the daughter of a wealthy household, living in an area where you might use *this* station to head to the Royal Capital. Furthermore, your grandmother was neither a soldier nor a knight, but had a job somewhat resembling a police officer's. The Lady Detective, the Earl of Reine, is very famous."

Now that he put it that way, it did seem like he could have figured it out, but they hadn't been speaking properly for more than a couple of minutes. To think that he had guessed her identity correctly in such a short time struck fear into Octavia, beyond mere shock.

"Octavia de Reine. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"The nerve of this fellow," Hat cried out from under Octavia's arm. "How did he even guess your name?! He has to be dangerous!"

In silent agreement with Hat, Octavia pulled back slightly and inquired, "I-Indeed, I am Octavia...but what are you, some sort of con man?"

"Con man," the young man repeated, chuckling good-naturedly. It made his undeniably noble visage look almost childish. He smoothly drew away the hand that grasped Octavia's. "I-I have never once been addressed in that fashion before."

"Am I wrong?"

"In the House of Reine, there are two young ladies around your age. And I happened to see Lady Jessie's face at the time of her societal debut. After that, it was merely a process of elimination."

Octavia had heard that at the time of Jessie's debut, many young women had shared an audience with Her Majesty the Queen. Could he really have remembered all of them?

"You have a good memory, don't you?"

"I wonder about that. Although I do remember everyone in the directory of nobles."

“Everyone?! All of the nobility in the kingdom of Angelus?!”

“That’s just essential knowledge in my world. After all, I *am* a young brat who just inherited the title of marquis.”

Is that how things are in society? Octavia, who still hadn’t been afforded a societal debut, knew nothing about noble society except for the smattering she had picked up here and there. But the creepiness of this conversation could not be dispelled so easily, and Octavia finally started to withdraw entirely. “W-Well, I think it’s about time for me to be leaving.”

“If we’re both headed to the Royal Capital, won’t we be taking the same steam train?”

“Well, no. I wasn’t able to get a ticket. I’ll be waiting for someone to cancel. The only vacancy is in first class.”

“Ah, that is most vexing. In that case, shall we ride together?” Octavia, thoughtlessly turning her face upward, was greeted by a broad smile. “Please allow me to at least grant you a ticket. As an apology for earlier.”

A ticket on a first-class carriage cost a sum that even a nobleman could not call cheap. What was the meaning of this, to purchase one so casually for a woman he didn’t even know? Octavia had heard from her grandmother that, in the present-day Kingdom of Angelus, even the nobility, who occupied the upper class of society, had to become destitute just to maintain their seats in Parliament.

“But, well,” said Octavia, “wasn’t your wallet stolen just now?”

“Ah, right. There was nothing inside it. Putting money in your wallet is like asking someone to steal it, wouldn’t you say?”

He’d told the perpetrator that his very life was the price of that wallet. Now, to find out it was empty? Octavia somehow found that quite chilling.

“So I guess you *are* a con man, after all...”

“It’s a mystery why anyone would be suspicious of me. As a marquis, isn’t my standing in society above reproach?”

“What if that’s part of your con?”

“Were you chased out of the House of Reine?” inquire the youth in a whisper, abandoning his polite demeanor. Octavia took a step back in shock.

“H-How did you know?”

“It’s simple. Look at the fact that your father, wishing to avoid declaring your mother’s identity publicly—not to mention very existence—chose to present your younger sister over you for a societal debut. Also, the obituary of the late earl, who made the decision to adopt you in the first place, was recently published in the newspaper. Considering all this together with the fact that now you are here, alone, seeking passage to the Royal Capital, the conclusion more or less emerges by itself.”

“If you really aren’t a con artist, then I suppose you’re about to put all con artists out of work!”

“Octavia, I understand what you’re trying to say, but you had better come up with better rejoinders than that,” muttered Hat.

“By the standards of the Royal Capital, where evil spirits run rampant, I’m quite a straightforward fellow. After all, it’s in the capital that the Demonic Heirlooms gather, isn’t it?”

The Demonic Heirlooms. At the sound of those words, Hat, clutched to Octavia’s chest, fell silent. After a spell, Octavia looked up to see the young man putting his hat back on.

“Why not consider this an act of fate, young lady, and join me on a short journey?” The young aristocrat resumed his air of formality and smiled. Octavia felt somehow as if she were being bewitched.

“All right. But dispense with the formalities. How shall I put it? It just gets on my nerves.”

The young man blinked, and then a wry smile made its way across his face. “If you say so. Oh, right. I haven’t introduced myself yet.” Octavia looked up again to see the youth bow theatrically.

“Belatedly, I am Raven L. Osvard. I look forward to our trip together. I’d like you to call me Raven. Marquis Osvard always sounds a bit stuffy.” Perhaps it was this overfamiliarity that had crept out of his facade, but he seemed all the

more like a child now. From his bearing and his rank as marquis, Octavia had thought him older than her. Could he be younger than she had thought? Perhaps even the same age as her?

“Understood. Lord Raven, was it? Thank you for escorting me.”

“Lose the title.”

“Huh?”

“Raven.”

“No! I mean, I come from an earl’s household, and you’re a marquis—”

“*Raven.*”

“Raven.” He’d pushed her into it. Seeing the man smile irritated Octavia, so she added, “In that case, I don’t mind if you call me Octavia. Apparently I can’t behave like a lady, anyway.”

“Indeed? Octavia.” Hearing his voice sound out each syllable of her name caused Octavia to stiffen reflexively. Raven swept the hem of his coat behind him and extended a hand, bowing gracefully. “You are a perfectly lovely lady. Now, give me your hand.”

Despite never really having been escorted by a gentleman before, Octavia wound her arm around Raven’s as a matter of course. Then, with the ticket counter behind them, they started walking. Octavia wondered what they were going to do about her train ticket, but from his manner, she knew without a shred of a doubt that he had all of this in hand.

Is this man a con artist after all? What was it about him? She suspected this was the last man she should be traveling with, but she also felt that having him around might make things more interesting.

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch, Octavia,” sighed Hat from atop Octavia’s head, as she stepped onto the platform with a strange sense of elation.

The long-distance overnight train, which at its inception had catered almost entirely to the royal family, had added many more carriages as a result of the

recent travel boom. The interior of these carriages was also quite spacious.

There were two first-class carriages, which were sleeper carriages; a dining car; two carriages in second class, as well as third class; and a freight car. It was a rather lengthy consist. The steam train, which departed at three o'clock in the afternoon, was scheduled to make a number of stops at major stations to pick up passengers. It would arrive at the Royal Capital by morning. Although the journey spanned two days and one night, the total time aboard the train would be just over twelve hours, or half a day.

"Your compartment is meant for two, so I don't think you'll find any trouble with the space," said Raven, and handed Octavia her ticket from out of his frock coat.

"When did you... Is this sleight of hand?"

"I'll be in the adjacent compartment. I'll come to fetch you later. Let's have supper together in the dining car. If we take supper just after five o'clock, we should be able to see the ocean."

"The ocean. It'll be my first time seeing it. Though this is my first time on a steam train, as well."

"Well, well. It's an honor to be able to accompany you through so many of your firsts." Leaving Octavia with that unnatural turn of phrase and a pleasant smile, Raven opened the door of the adjacent compartment. Even as he left, his manner was elegant.

Octavia, left alone in the shuddering corridor, muttered sidelong to Hat, "Could he be...a decent man?"

"No, this man is no good. Don't get too deeply involved with him."

"Is he no good?"

"You'll only be tricked."

"I surely won't be. Not when I'm this vigilant." She no longer seriously suspected him of being a con man, but something about him just got on her nerves. She knew she was being disrespectful, but she couldn't help it; she just felt uncomfortable. Could it be that she was just nervous, encountering such a

young nobleman for the first time?

“In any case, just be careful,” Hat went on. “No one thinks they’re being tricked while they’re being tricked.”

“I guess that’s true,” sighed Octavia. “Hm? Hmm? Does that mean that, now that I’m convinced I’m not being tricked, I *am* actually being tricked...?”

“Just get in the compartment, already. We don’t know who might pass by, or when.”

Octavia opened the door to her compartment. She made sure it was shut behind her before sitting down on the loveseat. It was fluffy and could apparently turn into a bunk bed. A card had been left next to her on the seat, reading, “If you have any questions, please come to the crew cabin.” On the shelf next to the doorway was water and a newspaper. The washstand, shoved into a corner, had towels and even skin cream. Now it seemed they were passing through the country, as a river of greenery streamed past the train window.

“First class is just as luxurious as you’d expect, isn’t it?” Hat, hopping up and down on the sofa to test its softness, was extremely satisfied. Octavia also threw herself onto the sofa, lying down.

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think we’ve had a chance to relax since we were chased out of the manor.”

“Quite. You’ve taken a number of wrong turns along the way.”

“Ah... I wish I had a map.”

“If we had *that fellow*, indeed, we wouldn’t get lost again. But where might he be?”

“It would be nice if we could be friends.”

“There are no tools which would fail to live up to your desires— What’s that?” At the sound of a knock at the door, Hat flopped over, lying still. Thinking it might be the conductor, Octavia pushed her trunk into a corner and placed her hand on the doorknob.

“Who is it? Raven?”

“Octavia. Sorry. I’m coming in.” Raven slipped smoothly into the room, while Octavia stood by the door with a vacant expression.

“The nerve of this fellow! He can’t just barge into a lady’s room! Though,” Hat added, “it might be a stretch, or even a fib, to call *you* a lady.”

Octavia’s way of thinking wasn’t as antiquated as Hat’s, but she, too, was shocked. Had Raven just been buttering her up? It still seemed a bit too soon for him to be showing his true intentions.

“Wh-What’s the matter?” she asked. “It’s still a bit early for supper, isn’t it?”

But Raven’s eyes were serious as he looked back at Octavia. “Have you done something?”

“Huh?”

“Some men in black, accompanied by the conductor, just came in—one by one—from the carriage behind us.” *Bang*, came a noise that wasn’t the jostling of the train. It came from next door. They heard a door open, a man speak sharply, and then a woman speak in a high voice. Octavia couldn’t make out the words, but it was clear they were quarreling over something.

Raven quickly leaned out of the open window, then pulled his head back inside and closed the window. “They’re looking for you, all right. I heard them ask if she knew a woman named Octavia.” As Raven locked the window shut, his expression was severe. “What is it that you’ve done?”

Asked a second time, Octavia started to fret. “W-Wait. I have no recollection of doing *anything* that I should be tracked down for.”

“But there’s no doubt that you’re the one they’re looking for.”

“The House of Reine might have come after us,” Hat mused, “under the orders of that shit of a prince.”

As Octavia struggled to come up with an answer, she heard the sound of disorderly footfalls in the corridor. This room would probably be next. Raven sighed and raised his head. He was thinking about something. Seeing Raven’s too-sharp gaze, without thinking, Octavia grabbed his sleeve.

“Don’t do anything.” Those were the words that finally came out of Octavia’s

mouth.

Raven, looking back at Octavia, replied bluntly, “So you do know something about this?”

“I don’t. I don’t, but I’ll be all right. I’ll manage, somehow.”

Octavia didn’t know who her pursuers were, but they were rummaging around a first-class carriage like they owned it, dragging the conductor along behind them. These were not mild-mannered men. Even so, she would be fine. Octavia had *allies*.

“So, you can keep out of this.”

Raven looked back at Octavia, his eyes wide. Amazement, bewilderment, wariness—all of these emotions were laid bare now that she had thrown him off his guard, swirling around behind his eyes. As they exchanged looks, sizing each other up, a knock at the door interrupted them.

Raven seized Octavia’s arm as she sat up to answer the door. Then he swiftly locked the door from the inside. But the conductor stood on the other side; the lock could easily be opened.

“What are you doing?”

“Being told to keep out of something makes me want to stick my nose into it even more.”

“Huh?!”

Octavia was transfixed by the voice on the other side of the door: “That’s enough! Unlock the door.” Suddenly she found herself looking up at the ceiling, having been pushed onto the sofa from above. Hat, who had bounced to the floor when the cushion he sat on rebounded, cried, “*D-Damn you!* In the name of my omniscience and omnipotence, I’ll rip you to shreds!”

A man’s hand was clasped over Octavia’s mouth. Failing to understand the meaning of this, Octavia looked up at Raven, who leaned over her. He was close enough that she might have been forgiven for kicking him straight out the door. Still, she couldn’t read any harmful intent in his hazel eyes, which sparkled with delight above his nose. Strangely, there was no look of distaste, either. Only

elation, the kind a child might feel upon overturning a box full of toys.

“Leave them to me,” Raven whispered in her ear. As Octavia felt an unfamiliar shiver go up her spine, the door opened.

They were vaguely aware that the two black-suited men who barged into the compartment had stopped in the doorway.

“Now, what’s this, then?”

With Octavia still sprawled on the sofa, Raven slowly got up from his place on top of her. He looked over at the men frozen in the doorway. “I’m fairly sure I locked that door, but can I help you in some way?”

There was a pause. “We’re looking for a woman. A woman named Octavia. That woman there—”

“Yes, that is what I’ve been calling her. Now, whether or not that happens to be her real name...”

“What?”

Raven gave them a throaty laugh. “Calling each other by our real names would be thoughtless, since we’re traveling in secret.”

“Hey, what’s this fellow’s name?” one of the men asked the conductor.

The conductor hesitated a moment, but then whispered to them. Upon hearing the name, the two men clicked their tongues in annoyance.

“So this woman is your companion?”

“Quite. But please, try to keep our presence here together a secret. We don’t want our stimulating journey to be spoiled.”

“Well, as long as you’re in good health,” spat one of the men, and left. The other man looked furtively at Octavia.

“Are you sure about this?” quizzed the conductor.

“The woman we’re looking for is almost certain to be traveling alone. I’ve also heard that she isn’t carrying much with her. Even if she was able to hide in first class, she can’t have reserved a seat. I’ll search the next compartment. We still have time before we reach the Royal Capital.”

“But...”

“What is this woman, Octavia, supposed to have done?” Raven asked, standing up before the man could close the door.

On the other side, with the door still ajar, the man narrowed his eyes viciously. “That’s none of your concern.”

“I do wonder about that attitude of yours, after you caused us so much trouble.”

In a quiet voice, the conductor answered, “She stole something, apparently, so we’re conducting an inspection. Please forgive the disturbance.”

The other man slammed the door shut, clicking his tongue. Through the door, they heard him say, “Be careful what you say.”

Octavia sat back up and sighed with relief. She picked up Hat, who had fallen on the floor. “You saved me,” she said, then paused. “I suppose I should say...thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Did I alarm you?”

“You did. If it weren’t for the circumstances, I would make you take responsibility for that.”

Raven, who had been grinning, slightly stiffened his expression. “*Responsibility*, you say. Once again, I must say—that seems a rather severe way of putting things.”

“My grandmother taught me to seize any misbehaving men at once, and force them to take responsibility.”

“For future reference, I’d just like to ask, what will you do if you catch hold of a man who can’t take proper responsibility?”

“Such men can be disposed of.”

Raven, who had now assumed a serious expression, stood with his back against the closed door and his arms folded. “You’re an unexpectedly wicked woman, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean? Flirting with men is proof of a lady’s discretion,”

declared Octavia, clenching her fists tightly. “It was after many rounds of deliberation that my grandmother chose my grandfather. I must follow her example!”

“I see. Though now I only feel more disturbed.”

“What a coincidence. So do I,” agreed Hat, though there was no chance of reciprocation.

Raven placed his hand on his chin. “By the way, those men said something had been stolen. Do you really know nothing about that?”

“Nothing at all. In the first place, who were those men?”

“They were constables in the service of the royal family of Angelus.” Seeing Octavia blink in response, Raven stood up his own collar and showed her. “They had a star-shaped badge on their collars, right? And they wore black uniforms, with black shoes. Those men are the eyes and ears of the royal family of Angelus, scattered throughout the kingdom. They’re an organization subordinate to the Inquisition—you could say they’re in charge of doing odd jobs at the behest of the royals.”

“In that case, could they have been sent by Edward?”

“So you do know something.”

Raven bent forward and peered closely at Octavia’s face. Though it was a private compartment, they were still aboard a train. With the distance between them suddenly shortened, Octavia backed up slightly toward the window.

“Well, yes. Edward is my former suitor—” She broke off. “Well, no. More importantly, he’s a prince.”

“His Royal Highness, Prince Edward? Forty-third in line to the throne?”

Octavia nodded firmly, whereupon Raven straightened. “This is a surprise. A prince courted you?”

“No. More accurately, he courted the daughter of the Earl of Reine. In order to marry into the House of Reine, he came to our realm, seeking to marry me. Though I heard that he did so at the recommendation of his uncle, the queen’s younger brother.”

“Hmm? So, then, from the moment he laid eyes on Jessie, he undertook to drive you from the household, since you were an impediment to his plans to claim the right of inheritance?”

“Isn’t this fellow a bit too quick to understand things?” grumbled Hat. To Octavia, though, who wasn’t particularly well-spoken, this simply made the conversation easier.

“Your guess is correct, for the most part, but I really didn’t steal anything. If, by some small chance, something had been mixed in with my luggage, I still don’t think there was anything in our house worth sending men like that after me to search for it. Besides, it wasn’t me who packed my suitcase.”

As Octavia pondered this, furrowing her brow and crossing her arms, Hat spoke up, snapping to attention, though he still seemed like an ordinary piece of headwear. “Could it be that, after you left, following a concerted search of the house, they realized that there was even less left of Granny’s assets than they had expected, and so they started to suspect that you had run off with something? Or else they might be thinking that there’s something of value in the mansion in the Royal Capital.”

“Impossible. I’m sure they searched the mansion in the capital most thoroughly.”

“What? A mansion in the Royal Capital?”

Octavia, who had replied to Hat without thinking, hurriedly explained herself to Raven. “Before my grandmother died, she left me a mansion. This was some years ago. My family may have only grown suspicious of it now. As my grandmother was so fond of me, they may think some heirlooms of the House of Reine are hidden there.”

“Ah, I see. Might this mansion in the capital be the mansion your grandmother lived in, when she worked as a detective?”

“That’s right. This mansion, which my grandmother owned personally, was separate from the House of Reine’s townhouse in the Royal Capital.”

“The mansion that belonged to the Lady Detective, the Earl of Reine... Certainly, one might expect something to come out of a place with such a lofty

history.”

“But my father supposedly already checked it a number of times.”

Thinking that Octavia’s grandmother might have left her some great inheritance in secret, concealed somewhere within the mansion, they had investigated the estate many times before the paperwork for the transfer was completed. Since they had found nothing of value there, they had concluded that it was just a mansion full of rubbish. Their conclusion was not incorrect. Without Hat and Octavia there to use them, the contents of that mansion might as well have been rubbish.

“Why would they begin to suspect again, after all this time?” she mused. “The transfer of the mansion was officially concluded years ago, with Princess Eliza’s approval.”

“Princess Eliza? You’re acquainted with Her Highness, the crown princess?” Raven gasped in amazement.

Octavia hurriedly shook her head. “No, we’re not personally acquainted. More accurately, she was one of my grandmother’s connections. I was told to call on her if I ever found myself in the Royal Capital.”

“Her Highness the Princess, who, it is said, will be the next queen?” When Raven put it like that, it did sound like Octavia had caught the attention of someone extremely important. But Raven merely hummed to himself in reflection.

“If I’m not mistaken, Prince Edward supports the faction opposing Princess Eliza’s succession—His Highness the prince, the queen’s younger brother.”

“I’m not too familiar with such matters, but I’ve heard that, too.”

“In that case, your family presumably thinks there is *something* in that mansion—something that could give Princess Eliza an advantage in the struggle for the throne, for example—and resolved to catch you before you could make contact with Her Highness the Princess.”

Octavia frowned in response to Raven’s conjecture. “But why wait until now?” Her family had known long before her grandmother’s death that the mansion had been left to Octavia—and that her grandmother had known

Princess Eliza. Neither had the contest for the throne begun recently. In spite of all that, why had her family only become suspicious after they had driven her out of the household?

Raven grinned at Octavia, whose face was screwed up in contemplation. "Could it just be that they're idiots, without any imagination?" he asked. A rather harsh appraisal. Even as part of a hypothetical, he had to have some nerve to speak so nonchalantly about a prince.

"Even I wouldn't have put it so bluntly..."

"I often have," said Hat.

"Now I understand the situation. As long as you're with me, not even the constables will be able to lay a finger on you so easily. I am a marquis, for what it's worth."

"Would you believe me if I said I was innocent?"

"I'd sooner believe a pretty girl like you than rough men like them."

"Pretty...?"

"I thought you might react that way."

Although Octavia was simply bewildered, he was laughing at her.

"I've never seen someone so pleased by a perfectly predictable reaction. This is a first. How refreshing."

"Your attitude really revealed itself in that remark. That was no compliment, Octavia," grumbled Hat.

"I've made up my mind. I shall escort you safely to your mansion in the Royal Capital." As Octavia blinked silently, Raven placed his hands on his hips and continued, "Prince Edward will only be able to take such drastic measures as long as you are outside the capital. If he tried something like this there, Princess Eliza would surely hear about it. Besides, the capital is the residence of Her Majesty the Queen. Nothing gets past her within its borders. There, neither the queen's brother nor Prince Edward will be able to do as they please, and, more than anything, they'll be afraid of scandal. If you can evade them until this steam train reaches the Royal Capital, you'll have won."

“Certainly, I don’t think my family would be very understanding if I went back and tried to explain things to them...but helping me won’t benefit you in any way, will it? Are you all right with that?”

Raven intended to protect Octavia from two princes. Although that prince was at the end of the line of succession, and Raven was a marquis, it was still a dangerous road for him to go down.

“I don’t mind at all. I mean, it sounds like fun, doesn’t it?” The corners of Raven’s mouth curled up, as if he’d just received a new toy.

Octavia could only be amazed at this unbelievably innocent reason. “Fun, you say...”

“If you feel obliged to repay me in some way, I’d like you to show me your mansion when we arrive in the capital.”

“Even if there’s nothing there?”

“Of course. I’m not thinking of doing anything unscrupulous. The truth is, I was a fan of the Lady Detective, the Earl of Reine.” Raven returned Octavia’s blank expression with a smile full of mischief. “I even have a copy of her memoirs.”

“Th-That’s the first I’ve ever heard of...”

“About that. The Earl of Reine— Ah, *your father* said, quite angrily, that we should no longer discuss that matter at our soirees in the royal capital. I wasn’t sure whether or not I should mention it to you.”

That a member of the nobility should work, let alone a woman, and in the lowly profession of a detective— After many years of hearing her father and the people around him severely criticize her grandmother’s choices, Octavia could guess at what Raven was implying.

Raven slowly lowered his eyes and placed a hand on his chest. “I know this is belated, but I would like to offer my condolences. I would have liked to meet her once, when she was alive.”

The sincerity in his voice stung Octavia’s heart. It rang differently from any of the makeshift condolences she had heard at the funeral. “I-Is that right? So

that's why you knew so much about my family." After understanding and acceptance, the next sensation that slowly welled up within Octavia was that of joy. "In other words... You're a fan of my grandmother's! You're a good person, aren't you?!"

"I'm glad you think so."

"No, wait," cautioned Hat. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Calm down, Octavia!"

"My grandmother was amazing, you know!" For the first time ever, Octavia had found someone who approved of her grandmother. Hat's admonishments were no longer audible to her.

After blinking for a moment at Octavia, seeing the sparkle in her eyes, Raven smiled himself. "I can see that you truly loved your grandmother."

"Of course! She taught me so many things. I lost my mother at a young age, so it was my grandmother who raised me."

"Really? I'd be grateful if you told me more about her."

"Yes, I'd be glad to. Raven, I'm beginning to think we could be friends!"

"Friends, you say. It looks like I still have a long way to go."

What did he mean, a long way to go? In response to Octavia's look of puzzlement, Raven just said, "Oh, nothing," with a richly mischievous smile.

They decided that they would continue their conversation over dinner. Naturally, since they didn't know who might be listening in, they resolved to avoid mention of the Earl of Reine as much as possible.

"I never thought I'd see you all dressed up," grumbled Hat, seeing Octavia struggle to tie her hair back in the cramped corner with the washstand. Although they would be in a dining car, it was still dinner.

"Well, I am dining with a marquis, after all. If I do anything too out of place, he may doubt the value of the upbringing my grandmother gave me." Octavia had never been interested in the opinions of people who disliked her grandmother, but when it came to one of her fans, it was a different story. She

wanted to appear at least somewhat like a respectable young lady.

But as she attempted to gather up her silky silver hair and tie it back in a style befitting an adult woman, she found that, though the individual hairs were fine—like a light rain cascading down her shoulders—it was surprisingly hard to work them. They tended to slip through her fingers. Her hair just wouldn't listen to her.

"I guess it's pointless."

"You're also quick to give up, just as I expected."

"Hat, as a piece of headwear, couldn't you do something to tie my hair back?"

"I am not a cosmetic item. I am an all-knowing, all-powerful administrator! Besides, I haven't registered any hair accessories!" Thinking it rather slovenly, after all, to continue wearing the same clothes she had worn up to this point in her journey, Octavia took a change of clothes out of her trunk. She now held her favorite dress, whose slender, not-too-formal cut she found most lovely.

"Well, I suppose I have no choice but to demonstrate my sincerity to him." Having said that, she took some lipstick out of her pouch and began applying it. She managed to do so without going over the lines. After she'd run her tongue quickly over her lips, a knock came at the door.

"Octavia, are you ready?"

"I'll be right there," answered Octavia. She then quietly called Hat over. He sighed, then hopped atop Octavia's head and performed a spin. With a faint clapping sound, he transformed from a white-brimmed hat to a tiny hair ornament in the shape of a hat, which wouldn't look out of place indoors.

After checking her appearance in the mirror one last time to confirm that Hat had landed cleanly in just the right spot, Octavia opened the door. "Sorry to keep you waiting... Raven?"

Raven, leaning with his back to the wall of the corridor, widened his eyes with surprise.

"Hmm," said Hat, "are you so surprised, you whelp? My lass may be a good-for-nothing, but she's not all bad. In fact, she's quite an arresting beauty!"

Behold her proud and majestic bearing! Don't lump her in with ladies you could find just anywhere! She was born with quite different qualities, bahahahahaha!"

"What's the matter, Raven? You look quite dazed. Does your stomach hurt?"

"Although her conduct can be a bit lacking!" Not quite understanding what Hat was saying, Octavia decided to leave him be. When she greeted Raven, he let out a long, deep sigh.

"No, sorry about that. I was just so captivated."

"Ah, it's this dress, isn't it? It was a birthday present from my grandmother. It's my favorite."

After a pause, he said, "Oh, is that so? So your mind went straight to your *clothing*..."

"What's with that attitude? Keep trying till you get your point across, you bounder!" cried Hat. Octavia backed up a few steps along the corridor and spun around to display her dress. Then she stood triumphantly before Raven, who still looked curiously vexed.

"Actually, it's my first time wearing it. My grandmother said to wear it if I should ever find myself dining alone with a man."

Raven blinked, then smiled wryly. "Now I feel a little guilty."

"Why?"

"Because if that's the case, I should have taken you somewhere much lovelier." After briefly begging her pardon, Raven reached out and carefully took a lock of hair resting on Octavia's shoulder and pushed it back behind her head.

"You have only yourself to blame," chided Hat. "You shouldn't have spoken to my lass so familiarly!"

Octavia spoke up in Hat's place, who sounded especially boastful, for some reason. "A dining car on an overnight train is a perfectly lovely place. I think my grandmother would say the same."

"If so, I'm glad...though I'm starting to feel like I'm being tested."

“In what way?”

“It’s just a feeling. Oh, that’s right. May I ask what you plan to do once you arrive at the Royal Capital?”

“Yes. Didn’t I say? I’m going to be a detective! Just like my grandmother.”

Raven slowly lowered his gaze to the floor. “I thought you might say that. This is most distressing.”

“Why?”

“It looks like I’ll end up being a fan of yours as well. Now, let’s go. It’s time for dinner.” Raven extended a hand, lightly pushing on Octavia’s back to hurry her forward.

The dining car was opulent. It was so spacious that one wouldn’t think oneself still aboard a train. Waiters stood at attention by the entrance and guided patrons to their tables. Octavia sat down at a table by the window. Just as Raven had said, they could see the ocean. Octavia looked out across the water, her eyes sparkling. There sprawled the sky and the sea, with nothing blocking the view. The water closer to them was colored a deep ultramarine, but as it spread out into the distance, it was dyed in sunset tones. Between day and night, a fantastical array of colors shone.

Gradually but inexorably, the fiery red glow drew back behind the horizon; little by little, the sea and the sky changed their colors.

“This view is incredible.”

“The blue sky in the daytime is lovely, too. This is, after all, a luxury train, running under the auspices of the railway baron.” The pair peeled their eyes away from the window and looked to the table. The menu resting on the tablecloth described a full-course dinner worthy of a hotel. In other words, Octavia didn’t really know what kind of food it was. Under *aperitifs*, she couldn’t even distinguish what was juice and what was alcoholic. She was still screwing her face up at the menu when the waiter arrived.

“What would you like to drink?”

“I’ll have a *kir*,” said Raven. “Do you like sweet things?”

Octavia nodded in response to this sudden question. “Y-Yes, I do.”

“In that case, the lady will have a Cinderella.”

Before Octavia could open her mouth to ask what that was, Hat answered her question. “It’s a non-alcoholic cocktail. Basically just juice.”

“Now, then. What would you like to eat?”

“Have you any recommendations?” asked Raven.

“We have both fish and meat dishes, but today we’re inclined to recommend the meat.”

“Then I’ll have that. And you?”

“I-I’ll have the same, please,” said Octavia.

The waiter bowed his head in acknowledgment, retrieved the menus and departed. Letting out a sigh of relief, Octavia said softly to Raven, “Thank you. You saved me.”

“I shouldn’t like to become the sort of man who’d get you drunk.”

Silver cutlery was lined up along the tablecloth, followed by cocktail glasses. Raven tilted his glass, filled with a translucent ruby-colored drink, toward Octavia, and smiled.

“Let’s make a toast to your grandmother, in heaven.”



“All right.” Octavia wasn’t used to such refined exchanges, but she smoothly accepted Raven’s invitation. *I suppose this is what people mean by “smart.”* Octavia took a first sip of her cocktail, which was sweet, sour, and delicious.

“Are there a lot of men like you in the royal capital?”

“If by that you mean aristocrats, then I suppose so.”

“What a fearful place. Is everyone there a con artist?”

“I feel you may have hit the nail on the head, but for now, I’d just like for you to enjoy yourself. Let’s see—look, over there.” With his gaze, Raven indicated a spot above the entrance to the dining car. Putting down her cocktail glass and following his gaze, Octavia suddenly froze.

“That is a treasured possession of the railway baron, said to be an heirloom passed down from the United Empire.” Raven spoke of an antique map. The map, drawn on paper worn by the passage of many years, was framed in silver. But to Octavia, there was no mistaking it.

“A piece of the map is displayed on each of the railway baron’s trains. Apparently, this segment is supposed to be special even amongst these prized heirlooms, since it depicts the capital of the now fallen United Empire.”

“The map.”

“Octavia?” At the sound of Raven’s voice, Octavia came back to her senses.

“Octavia, for now, just stay calm and sit down.”

Cautioned by Hat as well, Octavia returned to her seat. She had not even realized that she had stood up.

Raven peered back at her with a look of concern. “Is something the matter?”

“I-It’s nothing. I was just a bit surprised to hear that it’s an heirloom of the United Empire. I mean, those are dangerous, aren’t they? The Imperial Heirlooms are also called Demonic Heirlooms...”

“True. But right now, this one has the queen’s seal placed upon it. That means it’s safe.”

“Is that right?” she asked slowly.

“In celebration of the opening of this overnight train, Her Majesty made a gift of the map to the railway baron.”

Hat glared at the item displayed above him and said bitterly, “It’s no good. There’s no response. It looks like it really has been sealed.”

“It’s possible that the frame around it would currently fetch a higher price than the map, actually.” Hearing Raven’s explanation, Octavia looked up at the map once more. He went on, “I’ve heard that Her Majesty the Queen imbued that frame with magic power personally. It is that frame which keeps the Imperial Heirloom sealed away, preventing it from running amok and becoming a Demonic Heirloom.”

“A-Are there many such things in the Royal Capital?”

“I suppose so. Enough for the Phantom Thief to bother showing his face.”

“Ph-Phantom Thief?” This abrupt combination of words wrested back Octavia’s attention, which along with Hat’s, had been firmly fixated on the contents of the picture frame.

Raven gave Octavia a comically exaggerated look of surprise. “Haven’t you heard of him? He’s rather famous in the capital. Crow, the Phantom Thief.”

“Th-This is the first I’ve heard of him.”

“He’s the great villain of this century, who seeks to steal Imperial Heirlooms right out from under Her Majesty’s nose.” The last light of day that broke in through the window cast Raven’s face in a dark shadow. *Why?* With her attention fixed on Raven’s face—which wore an expression she couldn’t read—she was slow to respond.

“Excuse me.”

She quickly corrected her posture. A waiter in a black suit was standing beside her. In his hand, which seemed to be concealed by the napkin resting on his arm, was a gun. The barrel of that gun was pointed at Octavia’s head.

“Octavia?” Raven, seated in the opposite chair, probably couldn’t see the gun.

Softly, in a manner that was appropriate for a waiter delivering a message to a lady, the black-suited man bent forward and whispered in her ear, “Come

with me, Lady Octavia de Reine.” Somehow, it seemed that her true identity had been discovered.

Is it just this man right here? If so, she should’ve been able to handle him by herself. On the other hand, it might’ve been a good idea to get him to tell her what he was after, first. Then Octavia noticed the gun barrel move minutely in Raven’s direction, so she stood up. Feeling Raven’s gaze on her, she smiled broadly. “Excuse me. I’m just getting up for a moment. I’ll be right back.”

“I see.” Octavia waited to see Raven nod in response, then moved away from her seat. At that moment, Raven kicked over the table and landed a precise blow to the man’s solar plexus, which sank in deeply.

“Gah!”

“R-Raven, you...”

“There’s more than one of them! Run!” Throwing his jacket over Octavia and pushing her forward with her head down, Raven ran. He barrelled past the sounds of screams and clattering dinner plates, causing a woman to tumble to the floor as he pushed past. In the blink of an eye, a wave of confusion spread through the crowd; Raven wove deftly through it.

“Stop right there, you two!” Out of the corner of her eye, Octavia saw a man throw down his serving tray and point a gun at the exit to the dining car. She gasped, and then the gun’s report echoed through the carriage. This was only a warning shot. Although there were screams, it didn’t look like anyone had been shot.

“All right, everyone, stand still!”

However, his warning shot happened to land directly on the picture frame hanging above the exit. With one of its four corners now missing, the frame creaked and came apart.

Hat cried out, “Octavia, this is bad! If that was really the seal placed upon it, then that map is about to run amok!”

“We’re only after that woman! The rest of you can—” The man’s warning stopped at that point. Fear darted across his eyes, and he aimed his gun a second time.

With Raven still hanging onto her, Octavia cried, “Don’t shoot! If the frame is damaged any more than this—!”

“U-Uwaaaaah!” After several more gunshots, the frame and the glass inside it were shot to pieces, and its contents fell to the ground. A moment later, black tendrils seized the man holding the gun, strangling him and then swallowing him whole. Who was it who had called the heirloom of the former United Empire a Demonic Heirloom, and when?

“Run away!”

“We’ll be killed!” No matter how quickly they ran, the magic was faster. The black orb that had just swallowed a man whole released black waves of magic in all directions. In another moment, it would swallow the entire dining car. There was a shrill, metallic ringing sound, and the train began to shake violently.

“Hey, get the map!” cried Hat, and then: “It’s no use, the train’s about to be taken over!”

“Raven!” Octavia tried to yell at Raven, to tell him to run—knowing there was probably no use in doing so—then broke off. She was too late. Raven shook violently, then keeled over. It wasn’t just him. Everyone around them was affected in the same way. Supporting Raven’s body, which had gone limp, Octavia fell to the ground.

Looking around, Octavia saw she was the only one still awake. The orb that had swallowed the man was nowhere to be seen. As if the commotion earlier had been a fantasy, her surroundings were deathly silent.

“Octavia. If this goes on, the train will be pulled to the other side, along with everyone on it.”

“I know. The map,” she said haltingly, “will be at the head of the train, right?”

A tool never forgets its purpose, and a map’s purpose is to guide people. Octavia was sure that it would be trying to guide this train to the other world, where the empire, along with its god, was sealed away.

It was Octavia’s duty to stop that from happening. She went to stand up, but suddenly the sight of Raven caught her attention. She placed her hand on her

own shoulder, and the words naturally came out. “Thank you.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Hat.

“Nothing.” Octavia shook her head and stood up. But in truth, she felt she had witnessed something she should never forget. As everyone around him had fled in a frenzy, Raven, up until the very last moment, had held Octavia’s shoulder tightly, trying to protect her.

“Hat, have we any weapons?”

“As you very well know, there’s only the gun. Until I’ve registered the tools Granny collected in my index, which are currently in her mansion in the Royal Capital, we won’t be able to use them. Besides that—we have a land mine. What’s that doing in there?”

That’s right, thought Octavia as she opened the door to the dining car and returned to the first-class carriage. “Remember? We found it buried at the beach on holiday that one time. It was the first tool I ever registered. How nostalgic...”

“Ah, that’s right. I found it so lamentable that your first registration should be a land mine, of all things, that my mind chose to forget...”

Still making light conversation, they walked cautiously through the first-class carriage. To their disappointment, it was silent throughout.

“Why aren’t they coming out to bother us?” Nothing suggested the presence of those enemies that always appeared when an Imperial Heirloom ran amok and tried to draw the world, along with its inhabitants, to the other side. Where were the living dead?

Octavia glanced out a window, but it was pitch black—a lightless void. The train was moving through a space of complete nothingness. In other words, this couldn’t be the mortal realm.

Hat answered Octavia’s concerns. “It’s probably because it was only a *piece* of the map. It didn’t look like he had the power to drag us to the other side in an instant.”

“That also must’ve been the reason the passengers were left sleeping and

retained their forms.”

“Right. But there’s a chance we’ll be stuck here forever, wandering between our side and the other side. If that happens, the passengers will all die eventually in their sleep. Naturally, we’d starve to death, too.”

“I’d much sooner make my excuses and leave,” muttered Octavia, opening the door to the next first-class carriage. Her eyes widened. There was nothing there. They were simply in a lone runaway train car, traveling through the pitch darkness. Buffeted by a strong wind, Octavia put another query to Hat: “Tell me if I’m wrong, but I’m pretty sure there was another carriage in first-class beyond this, wasn’t there?”

“Octavia, look closer. The driver’s cab is there, on the other side. The man who shot the picture frame and got sucked in is sitting in the driver’s seat.” Since the frame had been broken, the map was activated. The map probably recognized the man who had shot the frame as its user, choosing him as its guide—or, in other words, as the driver. Octavia couldn’t see the map he held, but she was sure it was the map controlling the man.

Squinting through the darkness, Octavia managed to make out the driver’s cab, its faint lights bobbing up and down. The rail, which she couldn’t see no matter what, seemed to curve, to rise and fall along with the mountains.

Octavia took off one of her earrings and threw it ahead, where the next first-class carriage was originally supposed to have been. Hurling into the darkness, the earring for some reason created ripples as it was silently swallowed up. This sent a slight shiver up Octavia’s spine.

“Do you think the next carriage still exists, and we just can’t see it?”

“No. It’s going to be completely swallowed by the other side. You and I should be able to get back safely, but the train—and the map—we might well lose.”

However, they could still see the driver’s cab. Octavia looked up above her head. “I’m jumping across.”

“Well, that,” began Hat, and paused. “That *might* be safe.”

Placing her feet on the wall of the carriage they had passed through so far, she leapt up on top of the train. The hem of her favorite dress fluttering noisily

in the wind, she stood up and took a few steps back. Then, after a running start, she jumped toward the driver's cab.

Her first step, with her right foot, landed on the invisible first-class carriage. Before her high-heeled shoe could sink into the darkness, she kicked it off and jumped again, using only her other foot. Her second footfall was much the same, her left foot landing on an unseen platform; she kicked off her other high heel and jumped yet again. At the same time, she shouted, "Hat, my gun!" That was an order.

Hat answered in a language long lost from this world. "*Yes, Your Majesty!*" At the same time as Hat pronounced this resounding declaration, Octavia's right hand began to glow. "System startup. Authentication cleared. Summoning 'Handgun.'"

Octavia gripped the light that appeared in the palm of her hand, and it swelled up before her eyes, taking the form of a weapon. It was a small pistol. From midair, she trained its sights upon the driver's cab.

"*Glorify Our Majesty's victory!*" In lockstep with Hat's final blessing, Octavia pulled the trigger. Her shot blew away the wall of the driver's cab, revealing the man who sat in the driver's seat. It was the man who had been swallowed up earlier. The object he clutched in his hand, his eyes glazed over, was, just as expected, the former contents of the picture frame.

That was the source of all this trouble. All the same, it was a precious friend that Octavia should save. After fixing her eyes directly on the heirloom, she cried. "Hat! Its name is 'Map'!" As administrator of the Heirlooms, if Hat registered the map in his index, it would return to its ideal state.

Hat, looking at just the same spot from atop Octavia's head, cried, "'Searching... Error!'"

"Huh?!" shouted Octavia in response to this phrase, which indicated failure. "Why didn't it work?! It is a map, isn't it?"

"I don't know! That should be right, but—"

"As long as I can guess the name of the tool, aren't you supposed to be able to register it?!" Thanks to this confusion, Octavia accidentally placed a foot on

the roof of the first-class carriage. With a *blub*, she felt the sole of her foot begin to sink.

“Octavia!”

“Blast...” *I’ll be swallowed up*. She didn’t know whether or not it would be effective, but she at least wanted to try, so she aimed the barrel of her pistol down at the roof. At that moment, she was abruptly hoisted back up, hips first.

“Huh?!”

Her feet, which had begun to sink into the invisible swamp, were pulled free. A man’s arm was wound around her waist.

What...

Struggling to see in the pitch darkness, Octavia could just make out the edges of a mask and a hat, as well as a black cape. The man floated in the air, almost as if by some conjuring trick, and lowered Octavia onto one of the following carriages, where there was still firm footing. Raising her head, Octavia gasped as she saw red eyes glowing behind the mask. This was evidence of the magic of much earlier generations.

“That map is only one piece, you know. It isn’t broken, but it has been torn apart,” whispered the man in the mask. “Perhaps there’s still some element you need to pinpoint its identity. For example, where is it a map *of*?”

Her eyes wide, Octavia murmured, “A map of where... A place name? There’s no way—” *I’d know that*, she almost said, then stopped. She must have heard of it. It was a place that no longer existed: the old capital city that had fallen into ruin, along with its god. The man turned his back to Octavia, who had fallen silent.

“You’d better do it quickly. After your attack just now, I’d say it’s aware of you. It looks like we have company.” It was then that Octavia realized what the masked man was looking at. A mob of the living dead, emerging as if they had sprouted from the train itself. Their skin was the color of soil and had melted off in places.

Their aim was to devour the flesh of any human that possessed enough magic to live in this world, and thereby to return to the mortal realm. To obtain the

power they needed to break the seal on the god that had fallen into evil. In other words, they had come to devour Octavia and the mysterious masked man. Still, the masked man remained calm, even seeing the undead. In profile, Octavia saw that his expression was unwavering, as if he had known the inner workings of this world from the very start.

“Who...are you?”

“Just a phantom thief passing through.” Hiding his eyes beneath the brim of his top hat, the man smiled.

Octavia’s legs shook as she tried to stand back up. Hat cried out, “Octavia, there’s no time! Deal with this man later. Go!”

After she’d gotten to her feet, Octavia turned on her heel and broke into a run. The wall of the driver’s cab, which she had shot away only moments ago, had already repaired itself, hiding its occupants. If the heirloom wasn’t within Hat’s field of vision, he couldn’t register it.

“What’s your plan?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We jump.”

“That’s just what I meant—how do you intend to jump all that way?”

“Hat, the land mine!” commanded Octavia as she jumped once again. “Attach it to the roof of the invisible first-class carriage, in exactly the spot where my feet will touch down!”

“Whaaaat?! How are you going to make a foothold out of a land mine?”

“I’ll use the shock wave to fly across! Suppress the force of the blast!” Even if Hat had wanted to stop her, she had already jumped. Given the choice between flying across with the blast from the land mine and being swallowed up by that mysterious first-class carriage, he decided he’d have to go with the former.

“Y-You good-for-nothing girl! *Yes, Your Majesty!*” In tandem with Hat’s cry of despair, a glowing land mine appeared. Octavia kicked off from the mine as she jumped a second time. A deafening roar echoed around them as the blast sent Octavia flying forward. The shock wave acting as a tailwind, Octavia adjusted her flying stance and sailed over the unseen carriage.

“What kind of ludicrous method of flight is this?! We may not have any other tools, but I’m still sad to see this!”

“Quiet down and look, Hat!” Octavia once again took aim with the pistol still clutched in her hand and fired. A window pane shattered, revealing the driver’s seat. Without any concern for the fact that she was now plummeting, Octavia cried out the name of a realm that no one uttered any longer.

“You come from the United Empire of Ercadia, and you are called ‘Map of the Imperial City, Draine’!”

““Searching... Target confirmed. Unlock!”” The very same moment as Hat’s shrill declaration, the driver’s cab exploded. As Octavia was blown backward, the map floated up to meet her, as if drawn into her hands.

Your Majesty. Clutching the map to her chest, Octavia closed her eyes as the blast carried her away.



I have been waiting for you.

Your Majesty, Queen Octavia Draine of the United Empire of Ercadia. By the grace of God, queen of Ercadia, Defender of the Faith, etc.

Glorify Our Majesty's victory.

Octavia nodded. *Quite right. Don't worry. I won't let you heirlooms, who fought to protect our world, fall under our god's curse. Nor will I let you kill the angels who betrayed us.*

"Young lady, come on, now. Breathe."

We may have lost our kingdom, where you would have served alongside your queen, but I will always be your queen. To ensure that you tools never betray humanity, I will never betray you, either.

"Octavia! Hey, Octavia! Don't let too much of the map's magic build up inside you. Spit it out!"

"I guess it can't be helped," said another voice. "Forgive me, Your Majesty."

"Huh? Why, you... Ah—!"

Something soft was pressed against Octavia's lips. She remembered the time her grandmother had pressed a squishy marshmallow against them. Yes, that was a sweet memory, but her grandmother was no longer with her. The feeling was kind and sweet, and it made her want to cry.

Octavia opened her eyes. She suspected that the soft sensation she had just felt had not been a dream. After all, right before her eyes was a stranger's masked face. On her lips still lingered that unfamiliar sensation, which she had felt just then for the first time. Soft and sweet. She felt something trace her bottom lip gently, and then she came back to her senses.

H-Have I just been kissed? The moment she finally realized this, her body started moving on its own. More specifically, she moved to grab the man by his head and snap his neck. Before she could, the man stepped back lightly to evade her.

“If you have the energy for that, then I suppose you’ll be fine.”

“Y-Y-You... What do you...?!” Octavia was so shaken that she couldn’t get the words out.

From atop her head, Hat cried, “Octavia, take your gun back out! You can even use the land mine! I’ll kill this bounder!”

“I was helping you. That was just assisted breathing, magical edition. You weren’t breathing, you see.” Though the man’s mask obscured his face, he seemed to smile mischievously.

Her whole body still trembling, Octavia glared at the man. “Y-Y-You,” she breathed, “*surely* intend to take responsibility for this, don’t you...?!”

“Take responsibility? There’s no way a phantom thief would ever do that.” Seeing the man sneer at her, Octavia felt a blood vessel burst in her head.

“Hat!”

“Leave it to me!”

“Now, then, it looks like it’s about time.”

The train rocked violently. A patch of the darkness around them peeled away, and light streamed in.

“We’re returning to the mortal realm.”

The darkness continued to fall away in pieces as the scenery around them was rebuilt. Once more they saw the indigo blue sea, painted over by the sunset. The sky was still in the interval between day and night, the red sun gradually descending. It was exactly as Octavia had seen it from the dining car a short while ago.

“Well, I’ll be taking my leave. You had better return quickly, too.”

Octavia—who, in spite of herself, had been transfixed by the sight of the sea—returned to her senses. Before she realized what was happening, the masked man had kicked off from the roof of the train and was floating up into the air. In a panic, she shouted, “Don’t you dare run away! Get back down here, you coward!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Th-That was the first time anyone’s ever kissed me!”

The masked man blinked, looking for a moment to be lost in thought.

A strange feeling of embarrassment welled up inside Octavia along with her anger, and she cried, “In spite of that, do you really mean to run away, without even giving me your name?!”

“Crow, the Phantom Thief.”

Octavia shut her mouth, hearing this familiar name. Then she asked quietly, “Are you...the same phantom thief who’s after the Imperial Heirlooms?”

“I hope you will find me a worthy opponent.” Crow chuckled faintly; it struck a nerve for Octavia.

“You scoundrel! Come down here so I can show you how to take responsibility for your actions!”

“Well, I suppose I really did lack restraint, this time. Sticking my nose into this mess, just for fun, without even sending a letter of notice, is an act unbefitting the character of a phantom thief. By way of apology, allow me to tidy up your troubles. That way, you’ll be able to reach the Royal Capital safely.”

“You’re the only thing troubling me right now, though!”

“See you again, Miss Detective.”

“No, I’m telling you, you need to take responsibility—” She broke off. “Hey, don’t run away!”

With a whirl of his cape, the phantom thief vanished, just as the last of the darkness peeled away. At the same time, an intense light suffused the space around Octavia, turning her vision pure white.

“Octavia... Octavia!” *Someone is trying to wake me up.* As Octavia realized this, she remembered that kiss—the height of irresponsibility—and sat up quickly, her eyes opening wide in anger.

“I’m awake, all right!”

“I-I see. That’s good to hear.” Octavia saw Raven’s face. He batted his eyelashes in surprise. She was no longer on top of the train, exposed to the roaring wind. She was back inside the dining car.

Octavia looked around. Many people were still slumped on the floor beneath their tables, but as she worked her way around, calling out to them and shaking them awake, they all began to rouse from their slumbers. The conductor, remembering his own duty, called out to the passengers, asking if anyone was injured.

“It looks as if everyone suddenly fainted, somehow.”

So I’ve returned. With this confirmation, Octavia breathed a sigh of relief. Atop her head, Hat said, “It’s all right. In our reality, not even a second has passed. Don’t give us away—this is reality, right here.”

Reality. Comprehending the word, Octavia remembered. “By the way, what happened to the men in black?” Those men had caused the commotion in the first place.

As Octavia remembered this, Raven screwed up his face. “The thing is... Just look.” Raven glanced over to where he wanted her to look, where everyone else’s attention was gathered, too. Octavia looked up as well, and she blinked.

The picture frame that had been broken by the men in black suits was still broken, and the map that had been inside it was gone. Of course it was—Hat had just registered it. However, in the map’s place, someone had slipped a card inside the frame.

I’ve helped myself to the Imperial Heirloom.

From Crow, the Phantom Thief,

To Detective Octavia, with love.

As Octavia stood there, dumbfounded, the voices of the other passengers, looking at the same thing, began to reach her ears.

“Don’t tell me those men in black suits from before were sent by Crow, the Phantom Thief?”

“Where did those men disappear to?!”

“Hey, was anything else stolen?”

“Who’s Detective Octavia...?”

“Everyone, please be calm! We’ll be making an emergency stop at the next station, so for now, make sure your own belongings are secure!”

The confusion and excitement dissipated in the blink of an eye as the passengers all hurried away. Rising unsteadily to her feet, Octavia read the message in the broken picture frame one more time.

“But the map was...?”

“It’s in our hands, Octavia. Don’t worry. In fact, we should be thanking him. With this, we needn’t be caught up in the commotion surrounding the missing map. It seems the men in black have disappeared, too. That was probably the Phantom Thief’s work.”

By way of apology, allow me to tidy up your troubles.

So those words *had* been sincere. She should probably have felt grateful. But what welled up in her heart was indignation—the indignation of the encounter having ended with her being toyed with.

As a detective, suffering that, of all things, from a phantom thief? But Octavia still wasn’t a detective, so it didn’t count. She wanted to think that, but she couldn’t. *With love? What’s that about? Don’t tell me he’s decided to take responsibility for that irresponsible kiss.*

“Detective Octavia... Would that be referring to you?” At this murmur from Raven, Octavia clenched her hands into fists. This letter was a challenge to her.

“That’s right.”

“Don’t tell me you’re acquainted with the Phantom Thief?”

“Of course not. But that man...” She wanted to grind her teeth, but she kept them apart somehow. She groaned, “I swear, I’ll break both his legs—*and* I’ll make him take responsibility for his actions!”

“Somehow, I feel like that’s exactly what he wants,” murmured Hat, his voice muted. Octavia didn’t hear him. Nor did she notice, naturally, that the young man behind her smiled slightly as he licked away the lipstick stuck to the corner

of his lips.

Around an hour after the scheduled time, the overnight train arrived at the station in the Royal Capital. News of Crow, the Phantom Thief, had evidently already been circulating there; the train was quickly surrounded by journalists. Of course, the conductor was quite beset upon, but so were some of the passengers, and they each gave some sort of comment.

“Crow—the Phantom Thief—was in cahoots with those men in black suits! After all, they vanished at the same time.”

“One of them took out a gun, all of a sudden! After that, the map just vanished.”

“Would you happen to know a Detective Octavia?”

Gingerly, as if she were herself a criminal, Octavia slipped past the crowd. The vast station called to mind something like a theater, with its many train lines and covered platforms. It was so crammed with people that Octavia had to walk carefully to avoid bumping into anyone, so if she simply kept her head down as she went, she wouldn’t stand out.

But on all sides was a landscape she was seeing for the first time. As she flipped over her map of the Royal Capital, Raven snatched it from her. “I’ll see you off. You can take a coach from over here.”

“R-Right.”

“Lady Octavia, I presume.” A hooded man, whose presence she had completely failed to notice, appeared in front of her, a coach behind him. Octavia tensed up reflexively.

Raven reacted just as quickly, coolly opening his mouth to speak. “It is impolite to be so abrupt. Who might you be?”

“You have been summoned by Princess Eliza,” announced the man dispassionately.

Raven frowned. This was a direct summons from the royal princess. He had to doubt the truth of the man’s claim. However, the crest of the royal family of

Angelus upon the coach spoke most eloquently to the identity of the one who had called it. A crest colored in purple, said to be favored by the royal princess in particular. One would require substantial resolve to forge that crest. It made more sense to believe that this was genuine, and that Princess Eliza was already aware of Octavia's movements and had sent someone to attend to her.

"Understood. Escort me, then. Raven, you needn't come any further."

"If you say so, I suppose..."

"Oh, right. Do you have anything I can write with?" It was the attendant — the man in the hood — who smoothly produced a fountain pen and a notepad. "Thanks," said Octavia, leaving it at only a word. Then she wrote her address down on the notepad and handed it to Raven. "You said you wanted to see my grandmother's mansion, didn't you? This is my address. If you'd like, come visit me at a later date. I'd also like to thank you for today. At the moment, the mansion is far from any state in which I could invite anyone inside. Perhaps next month, though—some time around then."

Octavia had heard that the mansion was cleaned and maintained once every few months, but that was all. It surely wouldn't be in any condition to receive guests now. More importantly, Octavia knew not what state the tools there were in. It would be terrible if they did something nasty to Raven.

"You've really been a great help. It's thanks to you that I was able to make it to the Royal Capital in one piece." Come to think of it, she only knew Raven because she had been caught up in the scene of a robbery, but even then, he had been such a help that she felt apologetic. In the commotion aboard the train after the map had been stolen, the fact that she hadn't fussed or fretted herself—and had instead managed to pass the rest of the journey quietly—was thanks to Raven's consideration.

"Thanks again," said Octavia, and held out her hand.

However, Raven did not take her hand, smiling faintly instead. "If you'd like to thank me, then I'd really like you to make me your assistant."

After a beat, Octavia looked back at him quizzically. "Huh? Assistant? Why?"

"You're going to be a detective, aren't you? In that case, you need an

assistant, as detectives always do.”

“W-Well. I mean, I haven’t actually advertised my services as a detective yet —”

“I’ll help you with that. So it’s settled. I am, after all, Detective Octavia’s very first fan.” Now Raven took Octavia’s outstretched hand and planted a small kiss on the back of it. Leaving Octavia dumbfounded, he kept smiling, his face quite like a con artist’s. “We shan’t lose to the Phantom Thief, Miss Detective.”

Octavia didn’t understand why he was bringing up the Phantom Thief at this juncture. All the same, with that, Raven turned on his heel and disappeared in the bustling crowd. Perplexed, Octavia muttered to herself, “Assistant?”

“That’s why I told you not to associate with a fellow like that. He’ll come barging in as soon as tomorrow, he will,” admonished Hat.

“SSurely not. Why, he can’t possibly have the time to spare.”

“I assure you, he will. I’d even bet on it.”

“Lady Octavia, if you’ve concluded your business, then please come quickly. The princess can only take so much time for you,” said the attendant as dispassionately as before, hurrying her along.

“Right,” said Octavia, nodding.

The coach adorned with the royal house’s crest started to move at once.

The coach arrived, of all places, at the address Octavia had just written down for Raven. For a noblewoman’s townhouse, it was somewhat cozy; it was a two-story house. It was too large for a single woman to live in, but too plain for the daughter of an earl. As a matter of fact, the current Earl of Reine’s townhouse was a little closer to the royal castle, and that was a more opulent mansion. But somehow this place gave Octavia a sense of warmth, like the garden her grandmother had treasured so much.

“Princess Eliza is here?”

“She awaits you inside. It would seem that the previous earl entrusted her with the key.”

Now that he mentioned it, Octavia had completely forgotten about the key.

“That’s a relief,” muttered Octavia, before entering the mansion.

Inside, it was a little dusty, and the only light was sunlight shining through the windows. It was still more than enough light for her to discover the woman sitting on a sofa by the large window at the end of the entrance corridor.

The woman’s light silver hair was tied up, and she wore a white dress that matched the color of her hair. Her smile seemed to draw the sunlight into itself. The wings that sprouted from her back were also white.

“Welcome to your new home.” The princess’s smile was gorgeous, but it held a hint of mischief. She was a princess of this kingdom and a descendant of angels.

“It’s been some time. It’s been about ten years, hasn’t it, Princess Eliza?”

“Please, call me Eliza, Your Majesty.”

Even if no one else was around, Octavia would be the one who got in trouble if anyone heard that she had addressed the princess without her title. But she also knew that if she responded to Eliza seriously, she would still receive her graciously.

Hat snorted. “She’s showing you respect. Accept it.”

“Even if you call it respect...” Eliza, like most, couldn’t hear Hat’s words. But she at least had to be aware that Hat *could* talk. Octavia shook her head. “I hesitate to address my elders without the proper titles.”

“Having lived for eight hundred years, I sometimes feel much happier being addressed without a title.” An elegant smile spilled across Eliza’s face. “Please, let us forget my age. Angels have no lifespan. As you know, even I, hatched from an earthly egg, am long-lived. After living this long, I wonder how much meaning age even holds.”

“I think that’s a very angelic viewpoint.”

“I suppose you’re right. Now, please, I’d like you to find our time together enjoyable. Consider this a request from your elder.” Eliza tilted her head as she pleaded with Octavia. It looked very cute, and it hardly seemed the mannerism of a woman over eight hundred years in age. Then again, perhaps this was

because she had seen eight hundred years pass.

“Understood. I can’t refuse a request from someone to whom I owe my life. If not for you, the bloodline of the imperial throne of Ercadia would have perished long ago. My grandmother probably could not have walked free, and I wouldn’t have been born.”

Hat seemed discontented, but he made no objection. That was because he knew of the savage days when the inquisition had hunted those with imperial blood in their veins.

Eliza’s long eyelashes suddenly cast shadows over her eyes. “It’s also fair to point out that I couldn’t do any more than that. For eight hundred years, nothing. Even now, the imperial bloodline of Ercadia is like a candle in the wind,” she sighed.

“But I was born, so I’ve always wanted to thank you properly.” Octavia knelt without hesitation on the dusty floor, causing Eliza to fret.

“Your Majesty, such... I beg you, stop.”

Still, Hat said nothing. Therefore, this was probably right. The princess might have been a descendant of the angels who had betrayed the empire, but Octavia still owed her a debt. In the manner of a knight, Octavia took Eliza’s hand and kissed the back of it.

“I thank you for your courage and conduct.”

Eliza slowly pulled her hand back and clenched it in front of her chest. “My...my goodness. My heart is all aflutter.”

“I’m glad. I’ve always wanted to be your friend, if that were possible.”

As Octavia stood back up, Eliza laughed in amusement. “I would have never expected to hear such kind words from you, especially after my younger brother’s foolish behavior.”

“You’re talking about his withdrawal of courtship? That’s right. I guess I would have been your sister-in-law, if that had gone through. Still, I can’t say I feel any sense of loss.”

“I was shocked when my uncle brought up the matter of my younger

brother's engagement. For a moment, I thought you might have realized what I was up to, and I broke out in a cold sweat," said Eliza. "But then I thought that this might've been another means to the same end, so I deliberately didn't oppose it. My brother, who doesn't have wings, is no different from a human. More and more of my brothers and sisters have turned out that way. This is proof that the power of the angels—of the queen—has diminished. That being the case, by mixing the blood of angels with the imperial bloodline, I considered whether I might not be able to set your family free, but it hasn't gone according to plan."

"I'm happy to hear that you gave me such consideration." Octavia smiled, then sat down on the sofa next to Eliza. Then she got down to business. "My grandmother told me to accept your requests. That if I did so, you would also protect me. Protect my tools."

"I hope that I can. I believe that we angels have been on the earth for too long. Our way of thinking has come to resemble the humans', so that my uncle has become desirous of power and has started to vie for the throne. And the queen's—my mother's—way of thanking your people, who sealed away the mad god..." Eliza trailed off. "Already having lost your kingdom, you chose to recover the Demonic Heirlooms, cursed by that god. Not only did my mother choose not to help you, she has excitedly captured and jailed any members of your family that she could find. Just how many have passed away, only able to look up at the sky from within the castle..."

"Let's put these difficult matters aside. That has all already passed. I want to repay you for protecting me, my mother, and my grandmother. Just think of me as a detective."

Eliza narrowed her eyes at Octavia. When Octavia smiled slightly, Eliza smiled as well. "I suppose you're right. There's no helping what's already long since past. Now, then, please allow me to make a request of you. There's someone I'd like you to find."

"Sounds like a job for a detective. Can I ask you for some details?"

"The one I'd like you to look for," she said, "is this child."



The photograph she presented Octavia with was of a young girl hugging a soft toy rabbit. Black hair rained down from under her wide-brimmed hat, which was adorned with a white feather. That hair color was rare. Frills of white lace stood out plainly on her black dress, and she wore red shoes with buckles on them. She was sitting in a chair. Her facial features were refined, but her expression was dark. An air of gloom hung over the photograph as a whole.

This seems a bit irregular. Though the paintings and furniture one would expect were all there around the girl, they seemed to have been placed without much care, as if they were in storage. Octavia saw an antique doll on the floor and mused that a young girl would probably love to have such a thing; she also noticed a music box with an open lid, a stick of lipstick, and a perfume bottle scattered beside it. Octavia could find no sense of unity, no sense of purpose, in this tableau. It was difficult even to judge whether or not the girl was the subject of the photograph. That was the sort of picture it was.

"I can't see any wings. Is she human? What's her story?"

"She was a test subject."

Huh? Octavia, without thinking, voiced her confusion. "A test subject... You mean, human experiments? What were they doing to such a young child?"

"I do not know. I don't even know when this photograph was taken. In the first place, I only learned of this matter recently. Apparently there was a severe accident at the laboratory a few years ago, so their research is long since over. Almost no records remain, and the deaths of all the former researchers have been confirmed."

"In that case, even this girl might already be..."

"Perhaps so. But look at the back of the photograph."

Octavia turned the photograph over as she was told and saw that there was writing there. It was a script she didn't know. Hat put it into words for her. "'Successful subject,' huh?" It most likely meant that she was a successful test subject.

"Depending on the details of the experiments, she may still be alive. Also, it seems that my uncle was involved in the experiments."

“You mean His Highness the Prince, the queen’s younger brother? Edward was in his camp as well, right?”

“Quite right. It embarrasses me to admit it, but while assisting my mother in her efforts to seal away the Imperial Heirlooms, my uncle has always been conspiring to use them himself, or else to make his own.”

“I thought angels couldn’t create tools. At least, that’s what my grandmother told me.”

Eliza responded to Octavia’s question by nodding and sighing. “That’s true. The creation of tools seems to be an ability unique to humans. When it comes to the pinnacle of all tools, the Imperial Heirlooms, we angels cannot even *use* them. That was why we needed your cooperation to strike down a god. But this fact has always rankled my uncle. It seems that recently, behind the scenes, he has been making use of people to create counterfeit tools.”

“Counterfeits...of the Imperial Heirlooms? Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes, though they don’t amount to anything more than cursed tools. They’re far inferior to the originals. Even so, they can certainly cause harm, and we can’t say for certain that they will have no influence on Demonic Heirlooms. Magic attracts magic, after all.”

“If that’s so, then that experiment might have been related to the Imperial Heirlooms as well.”

“Most likely. And if my predictions are correct, my mother won’t forgive my uncle for a deed like trying to create his own Imperial Heirlooms.” In some ways, the strength of Eliza’s voice was filled with faith in her mother, the queen. “If this girl is still alive, I would like to protect her. To see that she doesn’t fall into my uncle’s hands...or, depending on the details of the experiments, my mother’s.”

Octavia turned her gaze upward. If she craned her neck, she could see Hat nod. “Well, why not?” he said. “The counterfeiting of Imperial Heirlooms—by her uncle and whoever else—is not a desirable outcome for us, either. As with the Demonic Heirlooms, we can’t suffer them to be used as tools to revive our god.”

“Understood,” said Octavia. “Hat seems to be content as well. We’ll undertake your request.”

“Thank you very much. However, take great care in your actions. If my mother should discover your true identity, all will be lost.”

“In other words, you’re saying that I need to make sure I seem like a normal detective?”

Eliza smiled slightly and nodded in affirmation. “I shall inform you the moment that I obtain any new information.”

“That would be a great help, but I must ask that you be sparing in providing me with information. As a detective in my own right, it wouldn’t do for me to depend on you too much.”

“I suppose that’s true. Any assistance or contact from me shall be kept to a minimum. Now, then, please take these.” Eliza kindly offered up two keys in the palm of her hand. “I was given custody of these by your grandmother. She said that you might only lose them.”

“How mean. Well, I *would* say that, but the truth is that I’d completely forgotten about the keys, so I can’t really complain.”

“So you’re admitting that the previous Earl of Reine was correct. In any case, one of these is the key to the mansion itself; the other is the key to the basement.”

In the basement was a vault where the Imperial Heirlooms had been stored, dormant, for the time being. That was what Octavia’s grandmother had told her. Octavia squeezed the two keys tightly in her hand.

“I’ve heard that the fountain pen is stored in the basement. The previous earl said that you could use that to keep in contact with me.”

“You should be able to,” said Hat. “The fountain pen can write letters anywhere, at least within the range of your magic, Octavia.”

“As long as you’re within the Royal Capital, I think I’ll be able to write you messages.” After Octavia related Hat’s explanation to Eliza, she nodded and rose to her feet.

“Well, then, I’ll only be in your way if I stay any longer, so I’ll be taking my leave.”

Eliza then curtsied in front of Octavia and smiled. “Your Majesty, may good fortune be with your empire.”

“With your kingdom as well.”

At Octavia’s response, Eliza’s smile grew troubled for a moment, but then she jauntily turned on her heel. The motion revealed the white wings on her back, the very proof that she belonged to the royal family which bore the burden of this kingdom.

With a sigh, Octavia also rose to her feet. Keys in hand, she walked through the house that her grandmother had prepared, that she might live confidently in hiding. She soon found the door leading to the basement.

The wooden door looked flimsily built, like it would fall to pieces if she gave it a good kick. Down there was surely a place that the sun’s light never touched. All this time, the Heirlooms had been down there, waiting for her.

My empire, huh? Feeling some weight and resistance, she turned the key.

“It’s finally time, isn’t it?” said Hat.

“Indeed.” With a nod, Octavia opened the door to find no one there—nevertheless, knowing that the tools were waiting for her up ahead, she called out to them. “Everyone, it’s nice to meet you. I’m finally home.”

Yes, Your Majesty. It was no illusion that caused her to hear this.



What a pity. I really did want to see her mansion. Still, the young man smiled as the scenery flowed past the window of his coach. *So that is Her Majesty, the queen of the old empire.* He was surprised to learn that there was still a successor. He had been under the impression that they had all been wiped out by the queen of the angels.

But Octavia, she was the real thing. The heiress to the throne of the Empire of Ercadia, which had challenged God and fallen into ruin. The only person who could take the so-called Demonic Heirlooms and use them as intended, as

Imperial Heirlooms. She was the queen of the humans, who handled the supreme tools that were beyond even the power of the angels.

Let's call making everyone think I stole that map—when, in fact, I didn't—and dumping the men who were after her in the middle of some field part of the celebration for her coronation.

However, the Royal Capital was the queen's territory, the place where the angels were most watchful. Any mention of the United Empire in front of an angel was taboo. He had heard that, once upon a time, anyone thought to be connected with that bloodline had been hunted down, one by one, by the inquisition. That being the case, why had she decided to leap right smack-dab into the heart of enemy territory? What could she be thinking?

Don't tell me she's genuinely looking for a husband! If so, it would be an act of rebellion that would threaten to bring the enemy's stronghold crashing to the ground. In this kingdom, in this world ruled by angels, it was an unforgivable thought.

But if one called it freedom—then, suddenly, things started to look a lot more interesting. He was overcome with excitement, unable to stop the corners of his mouth from curling up in a smile.

“All the same, I'd rather not have both my legs broken.” He would have to run away. Faster than she ran away from her destiny. Thus he spoke very quietly, so no one could hear, in a tongue that no one was supposed to remember anymore. *“Catch me if you can, Miss Detective.” Detective.* Surely that was a more appropriate term of address for her than *Your Majesty*.

EPISODE 1.5

Raven L. Osvard placed a finger on his shapely chin as he worried. He stood outside a bakery in the Royal Capital, where lines formed day after day. Baked goods could be glimpsed through gaps in the bakery's wooden shutters. They'd been made with more consideration for appearance than taste.

At the florist's shop next door, however, flowers bloomed proudly right outside, their mellow aromas wafting into the street. Tulips, daffodils, and wattles announced the season, arranged as if they were in a flower garden. Just looking at them would've cheered anyone up.

On the other side of the street was a jewelry store. Its calm blue signage gave off the impression of high quality. In the display window, behind one large pane of glass, was a display shelf, and upon it there rested such items as small diamond earrings, a large emerald brooch, and a topaz ring, delighting the eyes of passersby.

Any of these items would, in their own way, make a woman happy, if given as a present. The problem lay with the recipient's personal tastes. "Hmmm," intoned Raven, tilting his head as he pondered it. "Buying a lady something to wear might put her off, especially since we've only met twice. That's where personal preferences matter the most. Still, if it's not too expensive, perhaps I could get away with it. Something like a pair of earrings to go with that dress... Come to think of it, didn't she toss an earring away?"

She might not be very interested in accessories, but if I went with those diamond earrings in wrought gold, which happen to be on display in the window just now—they might make a good replacement. If I said something like, "It appears you lost one of your earrings in all that commotion on the train," she'd probably accept it. She wouldn't want anyone to press the question of where exactly she lost it, after all.

"It might still feel a bit cumbersome, if I only give her these. Thinking of something else she lost, I could buy her some shoes. But if I got her size exactly

right, that might be off-putting, too, and besides, there aren't any shoe shops nearby. It would probably be better to get them bespoke, anyway..."

I should leave that until after we have an established relationship—the kind where she'll let me touch her feet.

Raven glanced away.

"That being the case, the next candidate would be...flowers, I suppose. After all... Yes, flowers should seem innocuous, given in celebration of her new life here. They should pair well with the jewelry, too. Maybe one flower would be best, though; if I gave her a bouquet, she might have trouble finding a place to put it."

A rose would be too on the nose, so I'll pull back and go with something like a daffodil. Why not? Something about it just feels well-suited to the noble atmosphere of her mansion.

"Now, I'd like her to make me some tea, anyway, so let's give her some to go with the baked goods. They can be stored for a long time as well."

Right, then. I'll get something from all the shops around me. It almost feels pointless to have worried over it all now, but I consider the recipient of these gifts puzzling enough to be worth the worry. I don't know what sort of gift would please her. I still know nothing, understand nothing, about her. But learning what I don't know will be fun.

Fun was the standard by which Raven measured his life. No other conception of value really made much sense to him. Slipping the diamond earrings into his jacket pocket and placing the single daffodil in the paper bag, already crammed with baked goods, he set out toward the address that Octavia had given him yesterday.

It was in a quiet neighborhood, a short walk away from the center of the Royal Capital. It was not among the terraced houses, but was a detached home. It did seem a bit small to be called an earl's villa, but to a single woman, living alone, it probably seemed large. *I wonder if she plans to employ servants and the like.* Without thinking, he counted the number of windows, noted whether or not it had a garden, and tried to judge the house's interior dimensions from the outside. Bad habits like this were an occupational hazard for Raven, and he

hoped Octavia would overlook it.

Although no one had given him permission, Raven stepped up to the front door, coughing. The door was inlaid with stained glass panels. After ringing the doorbell, he took a deep breath. Perhaps he was getting a little carried away. Despite his boldness, this was his first time visiting a woman's house without any prior arrangements. A single woman, at that.

But the front door did not open.

"Huh?!"

Instead, a sash window on the second floor opened. The mansion's owner—Octavia herself—frowned down at Raven.

"So, you really did come today."

"Oh, should I not have?"

"I'm still busy cleaning."

"So it would seem."

Octavia had a kerchief wrapped around her head, and she held a broom. The circumstances were obvious. If Raven were curious about anything at all, it would've been the question of whether or not that kerchief on her head was one of the Imperial Heirlooms.

"Er, as you've come all this way, I feel terrible saying this, but today is..."

"I'll help you." More than any sweets, flowers, or accessories, it was help that she needed. She was not like other young ladies of the aristocracy.

Having made this offer with all due self-discipline, Raven watched Octavia panic to quite an amusing extent.

"Eh? No! There's no reason you should go to so much trouble."

"I'll just come in, now."

"No, wait! The door is lock—"

"No, it isn't. You forgot to lock it. Really, quite careless of you. I'll be intruding now."

“Ehh?! That can’t be.”

Raven, who had deftly picked the lock on the door while Octavia was still searching for a response, promptly opened the door. If she thought she could keep out the oft-rumored Phantom Thief with such an old lock, she was sadly mistaken.

But she was quick, too. By the time Raven had stopped in the entrance hall and cast an eye around his surroundings, she had already come running down the stairs.

“Wait, what do you think you’re—”

“Here you are. A housewarming gift.” First, he whipped out the daffodil and presented it to her. He knew it was vital to make a preemptive strike. Octavia, who was closing in on Raven, came to a halt. She appeared to be startled. Raven kept his gaze firmly fixed on her, to be sure he wouldn’t miss a thing. It was just as if he were stalking his prey.

“The house may not be ready for you to display this just yet, but if you wouldn’t mind accepting it, at least...”

“R-Right. Thanks. Actually, this is perfect timing. I’ve just put a flower vase on this windowsill,” said Octavia, indicating a large window at the end of the entrance hall. Beyond a small bush outside, one could see more buildings. Apparently, it faced the back alley. *She had better buy some curtains*, thought Raven.

“That being said, I’m far from done tidying up. For today—”

“Next is this. I might call this a present, rather than a housewarming gift.” Raven took the bag with the earrings inside out of his jacket pocket. To prevent the gift from seeming too ostentatious, he had asked for them to be wrapped plainly. He was aware that he had gotten slightly carried away in this offensive move.

Octavia took the gift as prompted and looked inside. As expected, rather than simply looking delighted, she opened her eyes wide in astonishment. “Y-You... This... Jewelry?”

“They’re only small diamonds.”

“Even if they are small, the c-cut,” she stammered, “is expensive, I’ve heard.”

That kerchief was indeed an Imperial Heirloom. It was saying things like, “These are bloody expensive.” Of course, Raven pretended not to hear it. After all, it went on to say, “You should sell them.”

“Say, didn’t you lose an earring in all that commotion on the train over? I’ve been worrying about it this whole time.” Raven began delivering the excuse he had prepared.

Octavia went stiff as a post. “Hmm?!”

“I was, after all, the one who dealt the first blow in that conflict. I feel a sense of responsibility, in my own way.”

“N-No, no! That’s not something you need to take responsibility for. Besides, that earring was only made of crystal.”

“I thought you might have lost it in all that commotion, so I inquired at the company that operates the railway, but they weren’t able to find it.” He was lying about the inquiry. Still, his words had an immediate effect. Octavia closed her mouth. “Take them. Put my mind at ease.” After that, he had only to remain modest and keep on looking troubled, and everything would be perfect.

That was putting aside the fact that the kerchief on her head was saying, over and over, “Take them, sell them, and put the money towards your living expenses.”

“A-All right. Yeah, I’ll accept it. Gladly...”

Rather than being delighted to receive such an expensive accessory, she only gingerly accepted the earrings. This wasn’t outside of Raven’s expectations, but perhaps it was that she wasn’t particularly fond of accessories at all. He had a feeling there also may have been a problem with *how* he had given them to her. He thought, *I wonder if I bungled that somewhat*. He told himself that, in the future, he would take greater care with any kind of accessory he wanted to give her as a present.

“They’ll probably go well with that dress, too, I think,” Raven added.

At this, Octavia blinked—and then her face broke into a smile. “Oh, I see. You

chose them to match that dress. I'm pleased," she said. Then, after a pause, she added, "Thank you."

Raven was glad that he hadn't lied, after all. Now, he was able to look upon an honest smile from Octavia. After this, she surely wouldn't just sell the earrings to cover her living expenses. Of course, he wouldn't have minded if she did. All the same, if he could help it, he'd rather not leave her with anything to feel anxious about.

"Sorry about this. You've shown me so much consideration, and I can't repay you with any hospitality. For today—"

"Next," he interrupted, "I have these."

"There's more?"

With Octavia frowning on, Raven showed her the paper bag. Before he'd even told her what was inside, Octavia's face lit up.

"This...is from that bakery!" Apparently, she knew of the shop. Starkly contrasting her demeanor up until now, she extended her hand to take the bag.

"I thought we could have tea together. How about it?" he asked.

"Yes, that would be fine. I've finished cleaning the kitchen! Ah, but we still can't use the drawing room..."

At Octavia's reply, all-knowing, all-powerful Hat pointed out, "With that excuse alone, we'll still end up having tea!"

"Ah," said Octavia, noticing her own slip of the tongue, but Raven would not miss this opportunity. Octavia, who had somehow managed to hold Raven off up until this point, had finally let down her guard.

"The kitchen table will be fine. I can brew the tea, if you like."

"No, that really wouldn't be..."

"Let's eat quickly. There are freshly-baked scones in here. They recommend spreading honey on them before eating. Ah, yes—I had them spread the honey for us, so it's already on them. How about you take a break?"

"I-Is that right? Freshly-baked," she sighed. "Then we'd better eat them

quickly.” Perhaps because she wanted to hide her delight, she suppressed her smile. But she couldn’t hide the restless shuffling of her feet.

I see. So baked goods were the way to go. Raven, having received the answer he had sought, wound his arm casually around Octavia’s waist and pointed her in the direction of the room that looked to be the kitchen.

After he’d taken his tea, he would, of course, help Octavia with her moving. If she really wouldn’t have him in the house, he’d invite her out shopping with him. He had no intention of being sent home so easily.

This is fun. Raven’s curiosity was perverse in the extreme; he always lost interest the moment he uncovered the subject of his analysis. *In the end, I wonder just how much she will surprise me. How much will she entertain me?*

“Ah, Raven, wait. I put a cabinet here for the time being, so it’s in the way.”

“Eh? Ah. Shall we push it aside, then?”

Sure enough, just where the door to the kitchen opened up, a piece of furniture was wedged as if enshrined. It was a walnut cabinet in an amber color. Its ring-shaped brass handles were embossed with a feather motif. From the shade of the timber that had been used, to the polished finish of the handles, and—most of all—the feather motif, it was made in a style that had been popular fifty years earlier. In another two or three years, it would fetch a good price.

More than anything, the antique demonstrated the good taste of its previous owner. Just as Raven was thinking that the late Earl of Reine really had been fond of Octavia, she turned back to look at him.

“Hold these.” Octavia thrust all Raven’s gifts back into his arms. As he stared blankly into space, Octavia rolled up her sleeves and, with a *heave-ho*, lifted the cabinet—which was at least half her height—all by herself. With a few brisk steps, she carried it over to the wall.

“Sorry for the wait. After you.”

Raven was utterly silent.

“Raven?” There hadn’t even been time for him to roll up his sleeves, let alone

take his jacket off.

I do tend to think of this sort of thing being a man's job, he thought, though it would be insensitive to say so.

Octavia clapped her hands together to brush the dust off of them. From the look of her, she was the type to pull her own weight.

"You're formidable."

"In what way?"

"No, of course—you possess magical powers. I was just surprised."

Having had this careless display of her powers pointed out to her, Octavia looked flustered. "Oh, that's right," she said.

Atop head, the kerchief groaned, "You good-for-nothing."

Octavia was still full of mysteries. This was still fun. Unbidden, Raven felt his face break into a smile. Like solving a puzzle, he would fit the pieces of her together, one by one.

I mean, I am a phantom thief, after all. "Well then, I'll make the tea, shall I?" Now, does she prefer her tea black, with lemon, or with milk? That is yet another of the pieces to her puzzle.

EPISODE 2

To my darling sister,

Have you been well? I heard that you arrived safely in the Royal Capital, and that you have now opened your detective agency. I must say, I was surprised. I never thought you would really leave the House of Reine. Prince Edward and Father were shocked as well, and they are worried about you.

I think that you might have misunderstood our intentions, as we never actually tried to drive you out. We only thought that, if you were to remain in the earl's estate, it might feel cramped; so, in consideration of that, we wanted to have a proper talk about the future. Now, with the sudden departure of your positively vital self, I am left bewildered, along with everyone else.

Why, our grandmother has only just passed away, so we are still not done divvying up her mementos...and, well, it must have been difficult for you, living in that mansion without our grandmother there. Someone like Father might have been angry with you, but I understand how you feel.

Only, I think dealing with the inheritance properly would benefit you as well. As for those effects that are inherited along with the Earldom of Reine, Father has already made progress with the necessary formalities. Still, I imagine that our grandmother left behind some personal property, too, just like the mansion in the Royal Capital that she bequeathed to you.

Perhaps you found something of hers in that mansion.

If there *were* something there, you could be criticized for having hidden part of her inheritance. I'd like to avoid that. Any such items would be mementos of a grandmother who was dear to us as well, so I think we should manage them appropriately.

I've spoken with Father and Prince Edward, too, about what we should do. For now, Edward has decided to set out for the Royal Capital, in order to discuss the matter with Her Majesty the Queen. It would appear that Her Majesty is

busy, and it will take time to arrange this discussion; but, as we have decided we'd like to speak to you directly as well, we intend to head to the Royal Capital as soon as we've heard from Prince Edward.

This discussion will take place at Prince Edward's invitation, so you may receive some communication from the royal palace. If you do, I would like for you to come and say hello. I know this is a rare occurrence, so you may feel nervous, but I have heard that Her Majesty is really very kind.

That's right—Father said that he would also like to properly discuss the matter of you working as a detective in the Royal Capital, like our grandmother. He said something to the effect of this: regardless of the fact that you weren't able to make your societal debut, an earl's daughter working like a common laborer is one provocation too far. I, too, am worried.

Besides, Father said he would consider introducing you to potential husbands! I heard him say that, within the year, you would be able to choose a partner and sort out your engagement. That would place your wedding next year at the earliest. As for me, I am marrying into the royal family; no matter how much we hurry our marriage along, the wedding will have to be some time from the year after next. Because of this, your wedding will come first, which I don't think sounds too bad.

On the subject of marriage, I must say that I feel terrible about what happened to you. In the matter of Prince Edward, I feel I must have caused you all manner of distress. Perhaps you no longer feel enthusiastic about marriage, but you are already seventeen. The truth is that you will have to hurry to find a good match.

I've heard you lament in the past about having children, so surely it can't be that you have no desire to get married. I'll do my very best to encourage you. So, in order to prevent the spread of any strange rumors in the Royal Capital, be very careful in your dealings with other people, and especially with men. As a matter of fact, I've heard it said that a young man has been seen coming in and out of the mansion where you are living. I have heard that he is your assistant, though. As we are talking about my sister here, I am sure he isn't your lover; such a thing would be unthinkable. All the same, the most improbable of things can happen. If it *is* something like a wayward romance with a servant, please let

me know in secret. If, conversely, he is a nobleman or a merchant, please be careful. He may have ill intentions for you.

You may be worrying about a great many things, but Father surely wouldn't want you to be subjected to the struggles of working life. I am sure he will find a perfect suitor to introduce to you. Please rest assured, and look forward to your engagement.

I know we've nagged you quite a bit, but neither I, Prince Edward, nor Father is angry with you in the least. We have only been worried about you. After all, we're all family! Some may speak ill of you, and we may only be half sisters, but please do not forget our family bonds.

Now, I must sign off, but I look forward to the next time I will see you, this time in the Royal Capital.

Your loving sister,

Jessie

This letter from Octavia's half sister was most puzzling. Octavia put the kettle on the fire to boil, then frowned and groaned, "Hat, what on earth is Jessie trying to say?"

Her partner, Hat, had retreated to a corner of the kitchen for fear of grime and flames. Now he spun around to face her. Ever since Octavia had started advertising her services as a detective, Hat had begun taking the shape of a deerstalker hat. This was said to be an indispensable item for a detective.

"That's a good question, Octavia. I, who am all-knowing and all-powerful, shall deliver your long-awaited answer! To be all-knowing and all-powerful means to know that there are things in this world that we *do not* know, and *cannot* know."

"Hmm," mused Octavia. She took a breath, thinking about this. "You mean to say that I don't understand what Jessie wanted to say in this letter? And I never will?"

"Precisely."

“But if I leave it at that, I won’t be able to write a reply. It would be nothing but trouble if she were to suddenly show up at the mansion. If even more doubt is raised about the inheritance, I may have to worry about more people coming after me...”

Recalling last month’s commotion on the overnight train, Octavia sighed. Since she had safely entered the Royal Capital, she hadn’t seen any more pursuers, but judging by the contents of this letter, they were investigating her again. That must have been because of the mansion that her grandmother, known far and wide as the Lady Detective, had bequeathed to her.

Her father had searched this mansion from top to bottom and judged that there was nothing left inside but rubbish. All the while sneering at her grandmother’s eccentricity, he’d agreed to the transfer of the property to Octavia while her grandmother was still alive. The moment her grandmother had passed away, though, having driven Octavia out of his house, he’d begun to feel more deeply apprehensive about the fact that he hadn’t paid any attention to the distribution of her grandmother’s mementos. Once again, he’d begun to suspect that there might be something of value in this mansion after all. So Octavia supposed, at least.

Even if he did find something, though, it wouldn’t do him any good. There was indeed a full complement of furniture and appliances in the mansion, so one could live there comfortably. Apart from those, her father had judged everything else in the mansion to be rubbish, or else lacking in monetary value. That was correct. In fact, if one considered these items in economic terms, their value would probably be negative.

The rubbish her grandmother had left behind was, in fact, the Imperial Heirlooms. If anyone besides the rightful heir to the empire tried to use them, they would run amok as Demonic Heirlooms, cursed by the exiled god. Possession of these tools was liable to lead to one being pursued by inquisitors.

Neither her father nor her half sister were heirs to the empire. The only successor was Octavia herself.

“I can’t very well explain the circumstances, either. I’ll be sent before the inquisitors.” Octavia had checked the dusty furniture and Heirlooms in the

basement one by one, and she'd had Hat register them, so all of the Heirlooms stored in the mansion were safe. Octavia could only do this because of who she was. To any other person, unable to communicate with Hat, this would have been impossible. And this matter was a secret that could not be found out in this kingdom, ruled by a queen who did not recognize the liberty of any successor to the imperial throne. In order to live confidently while holding that secret, Octavia had become a detective in the Royal Capital.

"But I wonder what all that about an assistant was?"

"Just leave con men like that alone. Don't get involved," spat Hat.

Octavia took the can of tea leaves she had been looking for off the kitchen shelf and frowned. She said, "Don't tell me that by 'assistant,' she means Raven?"

"Don't know. We *are* talking about a typical piece of aristocratic scum, who doesn't even have a job."

"The man himself said he was working as an art dealer or an antique dealer."

"He probably meant to say con man."

"I'm interested to know myself whether or not he's a con man, but if people are spreading rumors about him, that's a problem." Octavia rummaged through the cabinet in search of a teacup and sighed. "We aren't prosperous enough to hire an assistant. On the contrary, we're quickly running out of money to live on."

She had put a sign up for her detective agency the very moment she had arrived at the Royal Capital, and yet she still hadn't received a single job request. As a result, she had nothing to do besides clean the mansion, and now the floors all sparkled. Wondering if Hat could provide some useful wisdom, she looked up at the ceiling and groaned.

"That has been our problem recently. I suppose humans do require more than just shelter from the elements..."

"If things carry on like this, we'll go out of business."

"If we've never had a proper job request, is it really correct to say 'go out of

business’?”

Octavia held up the letter from her half sister. “Failing that, I suppose there is marriage...as long as it’s not my family looking for a candidate.”

“Any proposal of marriage that lot brings can’t be any good,” asserted Hat. “I’m opposed!”

“Don’t worry. I made a promise to my grandmother. I won’t be fooled by any bad men.”

“Frankly, I wonder about that as well!”

“Besides, if I get married now, then I won’t be able to go after the Imperial Heirlooms. It also might require wedding preparations and a dowry. Regardless of whether I get married or continue my detective work, in the end, the one thing that matters in this world is money,” Octavia quietly declared.

In response, Hat backed up slightly. “You know, for a lout, once in a while you speak the truth.”

“It would all be fine if we had some sort of job, though. Hmmm.” Octavia opened up a newspaper that was lying nearby. She had used some of her paltry funds to subscribe to the paper, citing the need to gather information. Besides, newspapers could also be used to wrap things; they could be burned as fuel or used to wipe windows, too. You could even take a look at the classifieds page.

“Here, a lost kitty cat. That sounds like it’s up our alley. Oh, here’s another one, looking for a lost doll.”

“A cat is one thing, but a doll? Doesn’t that sound suspicious? Plus, the reward offered is ten times higher. Did they make some kind of mistake?”

“I’d like to at least make an inquiry, or otherwise hire someone else to do it,” she sighed, “but as for someone to hire, I really don’t have anyone besides Raven.”

“That fellow is no good. He’s the sort who’d squeeze all the blood out of you, then move on to the marrow in your bones!”

“Octavia, help me!” someone cried.

“Wha?!” Octavia raised her voice in unison with Hat and quickly turned

around. A young man, out of breath, was standing in the kitchen doorway. “H-How did you get in here?”

“That isn’t important right now.”

“No, it really is,” Hat butted in, quite rightly. “The front door was definitely locked!” Of course, only Octavia could hear Hat’s voice.

The young man walked over briskly and took Octavia’s hands firmly in his.

“Raven, what on earth’s the matter?” Octavia, her hands seized by Raven, looked quizzically at him.

His demeanor was different from usual. Today, he was once again wearing a well cut frock coat, matched fashionably with a parrot-green tie. Perhaps owing to his considerable hurry, however, his agate tie-pin was bent slightly; and, more than anything, the expression on his face was desperate.

“Won’t you please marry me?”

He spoke these words so suddenly that Octavia could only stare blankly.

“Huh?”

“For the sake of argument, I want you to become my lover.”

“Huh?”

“What is this damned fool saying?” Even Hat, who would normally have had a great deal to say about a joke like this, was at a loss for words.

Raven, showing little concern for Octavia’s unfavorable reaction, groaned in anguish.

“If you don’t, I will be forced to marry a little girl in a bid for the peerage!”

A little girl, wondered Octavia. *Does that mean a girl whose age is only one digit?*

“For the nobility, marrying a girl about a decade younger is, well,” she mused, “not unusual, is it?”

“The only one I feel sorry for is the little girl. Well, congratulations,” muttered Hat. “Never darken our door again.”

“Your reaction is even more curt than I anticipated. But you must know—I believe in marrying for love.”

Octavia’s eyes widened. This young man, who looked like someone had put a suit of clothes on the concept of frivolity, had just said he believed in marrying for love.

At the same time as she widened her eyes, Raven narrowed his.

“You’re thinking that doesn’t suit me, right? You’re thinking, ‘You, of all people.’”

“N-No, not at all. At any rate, I’ll listen to what you have to say. Now calm down.”

Octavia was no good at lying. As if chiding her for her poor attempt at deception, the kettle on the stove whistled with perfect timing.

In the drawing room, which Octavia had now finished cleaning, there were biscuits and tea with milk. Raven had prepared both. This skilled young man even knew how to prepare tea.

Looking at it from a different angle, perhaps he simply knew that sweets would be effective in reeling in Octavia, whose demeanor toward him so far had been lukewarm.

Since childhood, Octavia had always had a weakness for sweets. In the hopes of receiving the chocolate fudge that her grandmother had sometimes produced from her pocket, she had often helped her grandmother with tasks, or made great efforts in studying subjects she didn’t like.

She couldn’t remember telling Raven this, but the biscuits in front of her were filled with cream, and the tea he’d prepared for her was heavy with milk and sugar. He had to know; she could think of no other explanation.

Am I really that easy to understand?

It had only been about a month since they’d met. Raven had visited the mansion at least once every two days, but how and when had he seen through her?

If she refused to acknowledge it, she might still be safe.

What exactly am I fighting against, she sighed internally. Still, she had a feeling that it wouldn't do for Raven to see through her in any way. Stiffening her face, which had started to break into a smile, she broke the ice. "Now, then, what are you so worked up about? As you are a marquis, a strategic marriage is surely only natural."

"Even to a little girl?"

"I do think that part is dreadful, but I am sure someone like you can manage to find a way out of it."

"For now, I'll take that as a compliment."

The most unusual thing about the present situation was that a marquis like Raven didn't have a fiancée or a lover already. When Octavia pointed this out, Raven puffed out his cheeks in discontent. Raven was already twenty—older than Octavia—and yet he could be so strangely childish.

"I do still believe in marrying for love, even if you don't seem to believe me."

"Let's put that aside. You've surely had offers of engagement before now?"

"This time is different. I'm being threatened."

That was a serious accusation. Octavia paused in the middle of bringing her cup of tea to her lips. "You're being threatened? You? Not threatening someone else?"

"I think you've misjudged me terribly. Why is that?"

"I don't think I've misjudged you too much. In any case, won't you explain the situation to me?"

"It was Mrs. Smile who approached me with this offer," he began. "The bride in question is Mrs. Smile's daughter. The young lady's name is Colette. Six years old. Her chief hobby is playing with dolls."

If they were to be married, that *would* make conversation between husband and wife rather difficult.

"Mrs. Smile is the lady in charge of an emerging trading firm known as the

Smile Trading Company. She's an impressive woman. She was the one responsible for the company's growth. After her husband died, their son took his place, but she's the one with the real power. She's even been kind enough to broker several deals for me."

So she's a work acquaintance. Whether he's an art dealer or an antiques dealer, it sounds like he really is working, thought Octavia as she made appropriate remarks. "So, was there a problem with one of your deals?"

"She said that the antique doll I procured for her daughter is a Demonic Heirloom."

Octavia nearly dropped her cup of tea.

With his chin in his hands, Raven somberly resumed his tale. "When I met you, I was on my way home from that very delivery."

About two months ago, Mrs. Smile had asked Raven to procure an antique doll for her daughter. She had ordered it as a present for Colette's sixth birthday, since her daughter was fond of playing with dolls, and also as a keepsake that she could put on display once she had grown up.

Both Mrs. Smile and Colette had seemed satisfied with the item Raven procured, and the deal had been concluded. The item and payment smoothly changed hands. Soon after, however, the strangest of things happened.

"Evidently, the doll vanished. When Mrs. Smile and her daughter searched their manor, they found it quickly enough, but then this happened again and again."

They would be sure that it had been placed on the mantelpiece, only to find it lying on the floor in another room. At some point, the ornament on its head had been replaced with a ribbon.

"Soon, there were rumors that the doll was moving all by itself." It didn't stop at rumors among the manor's servants, who said they had seen it walking through the corridors or peering into the kitchen. Soon, the rumors spread. It was only natural that eventually they began to whisper, *Could it be a Demonic Heirloom?*

"Mrs. Smile apparently tried to throw it away, but her daughter was dead set

against it. Besides, when she did throw it away, it only came back.”

“I say,” Octavia put in. “Isn’t this simply a horror story now?”

“Mrs. Smile at least wanted to take the doll in question away from her daughter, but each time she tried, it led to an argument between them, creating a vicious cycle. So, this time, she decided to come to me. She asked me to take responsibility for making her daughter lose her senses. After all, I was the one who procured the doll.”

“You’re joking. Marriage, based on that?”

“If the doll really is a Demonic Heirloom, no one will ever accept her daughter. Don’t you see? It is a bit forced, but it makes sense. Mrs. Smile, who has always been ambitious, wants to use my peerage as a foothold to climb into upper class society. Two birds with one stone, you might say.” Shrugging, Raven once again rested his face in his hands. “I know it may sound like an essentially baseless accusation, but I’m not in a very good position to brush it off. I can’t shirk responsibility, now. If it really is a Demonic Heirloom, the inquisitors will have their eyes on me as well.”

In this kingdom, it was illegal to own or use Imperial Heirlooms. There were cases where those who used them were executed. Even if they managed to avoid that, they would be ostracized, losing their livelihoods and social statuses. In the first place, nobody besides Octavia could use an Imperial Heirloom without suffering harm. If one of the tools ran amok and became a Demonic Heirloom, the user would be pulled to the other side, and that would be the end of them. In the worst case, the people around them would be caught up in it as well. For ordinary people, it was sensible not to get involved with them at all.

For that reason, the inquisition was tasked with retrieving and sealing away—or destroying—Imperial Heirlooms. They were experts on Demonic Heirlooms. The queen of Angelus had shared a portion of her power with these inquisitors; Her Majesty’s personal troops were permitted to carry weapons and to use magic, and they were granted broad jurisdiction and license to use those weapons.

Keeping order in the Kingdom of Angelus behind the scenes, they mercilessly

hunted down the Imperial Heirlooms and anyone involved with them. If someone were found to have brokered the sale of something that appeared to be an Imperial Heirloom, be they a marquis or otherwise...

No. Precisely *because* of his rank, Raven would not be let off easily.

“If the rumor has already spread, then this is very bad. Have any inquisitors come to investigate yet?”

In answer to Octavia’s question, Raven shook his head. “No, not yet. The Smile Trading Company has a branch office in the Royal Capital, but it is headquartered in a harbor town, a short distance away from the capital. Her daughter and the doll are both there, and so far, the rumor is only being spread between local gossips.”

“Meaning that it hasn’t yet caused enough of a disturbance to attract the attention of the inquisitors?”

“So far, it seems like nothing more than a mere ghost story. There’s been far too little harm for a Demonic Heirloom to be involved. Still, it seems that it has been brought to the attention of the police. It appears that Mrs. Smile intends to sue me for tricking her and selling her a suspicious item.”

It was a stickier situation than Octavia had thought. She was on the verge of sympathizing with Raven, if only just a little bit, but she still had a problem.

“All that being said, still, why did you come to propose marriage to me?”

“Mrs. Smile targeted me like this because I don’t already have a match. If I’d been married already, she surely wouldn’t have attempted this method of extortion.”

Octavia did not quite take his meaning. She looked back at him quizzically, her head tilted to one side.

Raven gave her a wry smile. “Mrs. Smile doesn’t believe in the Imperial Heirlooms. To her, they’re just a cock and bull story. She’s just that kind of lady. She considers reports of the doll’s antics to be nothing more than nonsense on the parts of her daughter and servants. She’s only interested in quashing these scandalous rumors. And she’s not the sort of woman who’d ever let an opportunity slip through her fingers. She knows that if she were judged to be

involved with any Demonic Heirlooms, she wouldn't escape unscathed. But if she dragged me into it, she'd surely fare at least a little better. She's merely hedging her bets."

"Yes," sighed Octavia. "I understand now that she's a shrewd lady."

"But suppose I already had a suitable partner! However large her enterprise is, she runs a trading company; she's no stranger to the balance of costs and benefits. She wouldn't directly pick a fight with the daughter of an earl."

Octavia pointed at herself, and Raven nodded, smiling slightly. His eyes, however, weren't smiling in the least. Was he inwardly irritated at Mrs. Smile's unreasonable demand?

There was something frightening about how one never knew what Raven might do next.

With some reluctance, Octavia nodded. "I-I see. In that case, wouldn't any other young lady do just as well? Surely someone like you has many acquaintances?"

"Not at all. I want you," replied Raven, immediately and definitively. Octavia could only blink. Raven uncrossed his long legs, then crossed them again. He picked up his teacup and sneaked a glance at Octavia. "I believe in marrying for love, you know." Again, his tone was strangely childish.

Bewildered, Octavia set down her own cup. "Really? Well, I believe in marrying strategically and prioritizing my own benefit. Since it seems that we are incompatible, let's each of us do our best to find a match elsewhere."

"I thought you might say that. You really are formidable. No, wait a minute. In that case, what if there *were* some benefit to you?"

"Hmm? Well, that would be a different story."

Raven frowned at Octavia, who had nodded all too easily. He glanced back down. After a moment, he slowly opened his eyes again, and a smile crept across his lips. Octavia shuddered and nearly pulled herself back, along with her chair.

"Why, don't you want some detective work?"

“Huh? Let me tell you, pretending to be someone’s lover is not the business of a detective.”

“I’m asking you to solve the mystery of the doll. Mrs. Smile herself, concerned about her reputation, has already made calls to a detective’s office. This, with the added purpose of establishing a scandal centered on me.”

Well, solving mysteries *was* the business of a detective, after all. As Octavia fell silent, Raven leaned forward.

“I’ll recommend you to Mrs. Smile. Because a Demonic Heirloom might be caught up in this case, no detective is likely to take it on, so she’ll be delighted.”

“But I don’t know if she’ll be happy with a detective like me, with no track record...”

“Don’t worry about that. After all, you were recognized as a worthy adversary by the Phantom Thief, Crow.”

On hearing that name of her adversary, Octavia’s voice lowered. “Huh?”

“The Phantom Thief specializes in Demonic Heirlooms. As a detective, you’ve caught the thief’s attention. Therefore, people in society have started to whisper the rumor that you might be able to deal with him, and they seem to accept it.”

“Why would they say that?”

“Because Crow, the Phantom Thief, mentioned you by name on the overnight train.” He was talking about the card that Crow had left. Octavia would never forget its humiliating contents.

“You are something of an underground celebrity now, expected to do great work as a detective.”

Thunderstruck by this news, Octavia grew flustered. “Th-Then why hasn’t a single job come my way?!”

“Because no one wants to get involved with someone associated with Demonic Heirlooms, of course.”

If anyone were to bring their case to Octavia, other people might begin to suspect that it was somehow tangled up with Demonic Heirlooms. Indeed,

people were feeling apprehensive of late.

As a matter of fact, part of the reason I started work as a detective was to reclaim the Heirlooms! That wasn't Octavia's only goal. Even her grandmother had taken cases that weren't related to the Heirlooms, and Octavia had listened to many of her accounts, which sounded like adventure stories, with her eyes sparkling. In spite of that, Octavia herself had fallen at the first hurdle.

"I-In other words, it's the Phantom Thief's fault that I have no work and am struggling to make ends meet?!"

"I suppose it would be," said Raven, hesitating.

"No matter how you look at it, of course it's his fault! That frivolous Phantom Thief!"

Stealing a kiss from Octavia's very lips was bad enough; stealing the food from her table as well was taking irresponsibility too far.

"Next we meet, I'm going to break both his legs, after all. I'll be taking some of his money for compensation, too!"

After a pause, Raven replied, "Let's take the opposite view, shall we? Everyone is reluctant to discuss any matter related to the Demonic Heirlooms. Because it's too dangerous, there are no detectives, and so there's no investigation agency specializing in this field."

"Isn't that the same as saying that there are no jobs?!"

"That means it's an untapped market—a wide, blue ocean of jobs, in fact. If you factor in hush money, you'll be richly compensated." Octavia, whose fists had been trembling, looked Raven hard in the face. He went on, "The fee offered by Mrs. Smile has continued to increase, and has already reached quite a large sum."

"A-About how much?"

Raven gently leaned across the table, and Octavia offered him one of her ears. Upon hearing Raven's whisper, her eyes grew wide.

"Th-That much?" she gasped. "But what happens in the event that the doll really is a Demonic Heirloom?"

“Naturally, if you can dispose of it *neatly*, so that no blame comes down upon her daughter’s head, I’m sure she’ll pay extra.”

In other words, whether or not it really was a Demonic Heirloom, she was to make it as if the case had never existed in the first place.

That sounds manageable, right? Seeing as all I have to do is recover it... And could it be that she really was standing at a crossroads before a wide, blue ocean, just as Raven had indicated? But am I all right with doing this? As things stand, that almost sounds like...

“I-It almost sounds like a scam, the way you’ve put it.”

“But you’ll accept the request, won’t you?” As if he were making Octavia an accomplice in one of his cons, Raven smiled, quite calm.

Octavia balled her hands into fists atop her lap. She couldn’t allow herself to be dragged along by him too easily. “Under what conditions will I be able to meet Mrs. Smile?”

“I really don’t know whether you’ve misunderstood me or understood me perfectly,” muttered Raven quietly, before slapping another perfectly calculated smile on his face. “If you aren’t able to solve the mystery, I’ll have *you* ‘take responsibility’ by getting engaged to me.”

“Mrs. Smile may be excessive herself, but you really take things too far, Raven.”

“Well, it sounds more fun this way.”

Again with the fun? If Raven seemed childish in contrast to his appearance, it was because he acted entirely based on his curiosity. Octavia felt more amazed than angered by his particular brand of haphazardness.

Still, without hesitation, she nodded. “Understood. Introduce me to Mrs. Smile.”

“Really? If you aren’t able to solve the mystery of the doll, you’ll wind up engaged to me.”

“Then I’ll just have to solve it. Besides, don’t you believe in marrying for love?”

Raven, who'd had that smile—the one that Octavia absolutely detested—plastered all over his face, blinked as if he had misread Octavia's intent. Then cheerfully, naturally, the corners of his mouth turned up again.

“I think you'd probably end up calling off the engagement yourself. I've had no success with men; I've been told that I'm burdensome.”

A romantic marriage wouldn't take shape unless both participants fell in love. It was well within her expectations for Raven to respond to her warning with an expression of slight astonishment. Her love life had been lackluster, but as the daughter of an earl, at least a few men had attempted to court her in the past. For the most part, after she had declared herself unfit, they would tell her, “That's not true,” and a string of flippant promises would follow. The gentlemen never understood that Octavia was speaking sincerely, and they only ever ended up embarrassing themselves. Therefore, she had a rough idea of just how “burdensome” she was.

In spite of that, Raven returned Octavia's warning with a defiant smile. “Is that right? That's just how I like it.” He didn't take his eyes off her.

She felt a shiver—only a slight one—go up her spine.

Raven's deftness in negotiations was truly superb, and the very next day, Octavia was clutching her trunk, ready to travel to the harbor town where she had been told Mrs. Smile and her daughter lived. The harbor town was a few stations away from the Royal Capital by steam train. It was a distance such that if one departed in the morning, one would arrive just after noon.

However, after Octavia had finished preparing for travel, she was not picked up by a steam train or a horse-drawn coach.

“A motorcar?”

“Hop in,” said Raven encouragingly.

Octavia's eyes were like saucers. She had heard the word “motorcar” before, but she had never seen the real thing. Although it had four wheels, it was, unlike a coach, propelled entirely by a machine. After she had thrown her luggage in the back seat, Raven opened the door for her and directed her to sit

in the front passenger seat. She gingerly sat down.

After the car started moving, Hat raised his voice. “Well, well! You have some nice stuff, don’t you? It’s been a while since I’ve ridden in a car! I guess the ban on technology of this level has been lifted.”

“I-It’s amazing,” breathed Octavia. “Are such things commonplace in the Royal Capital?”

“They’ve not yet been adopted widely. Petrol would need to become even cheaper. The roads also need paving.”

With Octavia in the front passenger seat, Raven took the wheel. “When I’m just traveling within the Royal Capital, I guess I’d use a coach, too. Only, I have a weakness for novel things, and I find I always need to get my hands on them.”

“This fellow really is a ball of curiosity. It’ll land him in deep trouble, one of these days,” muttered Hat.

“I-It’s so clean inside, too.” The car was comfortable, but because the road was bumpy, Octavia’s voice was shaky.

Nonchalant, Raven replied, “Well, today *is* my first time driving it.”

“Huh?!”



“Let me out!” cried Hat. “Don’t we have a system for this? Don’t you have to have a driver’s license or something? We don’t, do we?!”

Raven laughed. “Just joking. I’ve practiced plenty in order to drive you around, so don’t worry.”

“Really? I can trust you?!”

“That just means this is his first time taking a proper drive. Don’t be fooled, Octavia!”

Raven’s joyful smile said, *Leave it to me*, but he gave no reply.

With the convertible roof open, Octavia could see the scenery pass by much more smoothly—and much more quickly—than she could have in a horse-drawn coach. The road was an excessively wide single lane, so they needn’t worry about accidents. After they had traveled quite some distance, they were overtaken by the steam train, but Raven laughed and said that the car made travel more carefree, anyway. Certainly it was nice not to have to worry about one’s departure time.

They took their luncheon in a small town on the way to the harbor. Then, as they drove up a hill in the road, they began to smell the sea breeze in the air. As they crested the hill, the sea appeared beyond the fields that lay before them.

“Soon, we’ll be able to see the harbor.”

“Is that it?!”

A great number of ships and piers leapt into view. The harbor town’s white stone buildings followed. Octavia’s eyes sparkled. The sea flowed into the town by a number of waterways that ran through it, such that one could circle the town in a boat. Over the waterways were several bridges, and one could see pedestrians and horse-drawn wagons busily crossing in both directions. As if to match the waterways, the roofs of the white stone buildings were a uniform shade of blue.

The sight of seagulls flying about suited the town well.

“What a pretty town!”

“Although it isn’t very big, it’s the busiest town in these parts.”

They lost sight of the town as they descended the hill, but soon, a sign appeared to direct them back toward it. They parked the car in a suburb where wagons also stopped. Octavia started to pull her luggage out of the back of the car, but Raven stopped her.

“I’ll carry that.”

“It’s just one bag. I’ll be fine. Also, you have more luggage than me. Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to help you?”

After a pause, Raven replied, “How about we each carry our own bags?”

“Fine with me. That’s how it’s usually done. All the same, do let me know if you want my help. I have a hand free.” As Octavia waved the hand that wasn’t holding her luggage, Raven smiled wryly, pulling his own bags out of the back seat.

“If you want to help others, it’s vital to keep your own hands free, huh? You’ve hit on an important truth.”

“I didn’t mean to say anything as profound as that.”

A man carrying a large camera, along with some other men carrying other equipment, who seemed to be reporters, sprinted behind Octavia and Raven.

“Hey, hurry up! We’re barging into the Smile Trading Company while we still can, there’s a scoop!”

“Get a statement before the police have a chance! This story is taking over the front page.”

Octavia inadvertently found herself facing Raven. “Is there some kind of festival on? They seemed quite lively.”

“It seems that way. But I don’t think I remember any festival being scheduled —”

“The headline will be ‘The Secret of the Doll on Which Crow, the Phantom Thief, Has Set His Sights’!”

Octavia’s body moved before she could think. She seized the arm of a man noting down the headline he had just been told.

He gasped, “What do you want?”

“Did you say Crow, the Phantom Thief?”

Raven stepped in between Octavia’s menacing frame and the man’s. “We came to conduct some business at the Smile Trading Company.” As if to arbitrate their discussion, he rephrased Octavia’s question: “Has something happened?”

“Sure has,” said the man, still holding his pen and notebook, before launching excitedly into his explanation. “There’s been a letter of announcement from Crow, the Phantom Thief! He says he’s after the doll that belongs to Mrs. Smile’s daughter, Colette. The whole town is abuzz with the story!”

Near the harbor, the Smile Trading Company’s headquarters were already packed with reporters and curious onlookers. A few police constables could be seen controlling traffic at the entrances and exits of the building. It really was as if some festival were going on.

“When is the Phantom Thief meant to appear?”

“Nine o’clock tonight, the note says! I wonder if the police will be ready in time.”

“I hear his announcement has been stuck to the trading company’s noticeboard. I’d really like to see it for myself.”

“This really is quite the commotion,” muttered Hat from atop Octavia’s head, having assumed his wide-brimmed shape.

Octavia nodded. “The way things stand, it doesn’t look like we’ll be able to talk to her.”

“Octavia, let’s head to Mrs. Smile’s mansion. That would be a safer bet,” said Raven, clapping a hand on Octavia’s shoulder.

Octavia nodded again.

Mrs. Smile’s residence stood at the foot of a low hill that rose in the direction of the harbor’s lighthouse. There was no garden, but a number of pale red flowers bloomed on the path leading up the hill to the lighthouse, so it almost

looked like it had been built in the middle of a flower garden.

“Hey, Octavia. Look at that.” Looking in the direction Hat had indicated, Octavia saw a person walking down the flower-covered hill. It was a girl of fourteen or fifteen at most, carrying a smaller girl on her back. Although the older girl was too far away for Octavia to get a good look, it was clear that one couldn’t call her pretty, not even in flattery. The hems of her baggy clothes, ill-suited to her body, were threadbare in many places. In stark contrast, the little girl on her back looked to be wearing a dress of fine quality.

Raven, looking out at the same scene as Octavia, looked puzzled. “Oh, isn’t that young Colette over there? The little girl, the one being carried.”

He seemed to recognize her. *He really does have a good memory*, thought Octavia, before answering his question with one of her own. “Have you seen the girl carrying her before?”

“No, I haven’t. But this maid... No, she wouldn’t be a maid, not with those clothes. Maybe a girl from the neighborhood? Though she seems to be headed towards Mrs. Smile’s mansion.”

“Octavia, we need confirmation. There’s something strange about the older girl,” cautioned Hat.

“Don’t tell me you’ve run off with Miss Colette again?!” came a loud voice from behind the mansion. That was where the girls had headed from the flower patch. Octavia ran over in a hurry and rounded the wall of the mansion. She was just in time to see the slovenly girl get pushed over by a solidly-built man. Octavia held out her arms to catch her. The man watched her do this, evidently shocked.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“What’s a big man like you doing, pushing around such a small child? Have you no shame?” Octavia glared at the man, supporting the girl’s shoulders.

For a moment, he appeared to be cowed, screwing up his face, but he soon shouted back at her. Drops of spittle flew from his mouth. “You have no idea what you’re talking about! I’m worried about the young lady’s safety. If anything happened to her, I’d be held responsible!”

“Even so, that’s no reason to shove this girl around.”

“That was her fault for stumbling around here! What a creepy little brat.”

“Miss Colette has returned safely to the mansion, has she not? If so, let’s leave it at that.”

Upon seeing Raven emerge from behind Octavia, the man fell silent. Raven, now standing next to Octavia, looked at the girl and grinned. “She looks like she’ll be a beauty one day.”

“Huh?”

Raven turned from the dumbfounded Octavia back to the furious man. “Let’s let this fellow go, Octavia. He’s not worth our trouble.”

“That’s what I should be saying—”

“You shall return to your work at once,” Raven commanded. “We’re going to enter properly, through the front door. Or would you like to start a new life, the sort where you won’t have any worries or doubts about your employment? That sounds nice, doesn’t it? Why, that sounds like *heaven*. I’ll be happy to escort you there.”

Since Raven had his back fully turned, she couldn’t see his face. Still, from the way the other man’s face grew steadily paler before her eyes, she could guess what sort of expression Raven wore. At times like these, Raven had a strange intensity to him.

“Never come near the young lady again!” Leaving only a warning for the girl, the man wisely chose to enter the mansion via the back door.

Raven turned around and offered a hand to the girl, who still hadn’t regained her footing.

“Are you all right? You’re not hurt, are you?”

“No. Thank you very much. I apologize for the inconvenience,” the girl answered awkwardly. She righted her posture without taking Raven’s hand. “It was my fault,” she muttered, listless, as if she were trying to convince herself. There was no sense of fear or confusion in her—one might go so far as to say she was utterly emotionless.

Octavia inquired carefully, “Is it true that you took Miss Colette away?”

“No.”

“What’s your name? Ah, I’m Raven, by the way.”

“My name isn’t worth knowing. Don’t mind me,” said the girl, quite incoherent, before walking briskly away. Without looking back, she returned along the same path by which she had come.

After blinking a few times, Raven shrugged his shoulders. “What a strange girl. Would you like to go after her?”

“No,” Octavia said, after a pause. “Let’s not.” She turned her gaze away from the girl’s receding back, returning it to the front door.

Hat, who was still looking at the girl, pestered Octavia from above her head. “Are you sure you want to let her go, Octavia?”

“You were in such a hurry to go and save her,” added Raven. “I thought there must be more to it.”

Hat said, “Actually, maybe we should hold off, as long as this fellow’s around.”

Agreed, murmured Octavia, but only within her heart.

She faced the front door once again and rang the bell.

It opened almost immediately. “Marquis Osvard, I was informed of your visit. Please, come with me.” A butler, appearing from inside the house, invited them in. As they stepped inside, the smell of the sea vanished as if they’d imagined it, along with all the warmth in the air. In the great hall was a chandelier and several decorative suits of armor. Above the landing of the parted stairway was a large painting. Amid this grand architecture, reminiscent of a noble manor, Octavia felt that she had suddenly been transported back to the Royal Capital. Mrs. Smile’s ambition to gain a peerage was transparent.

Conducted into the drawing room by the butler, they were served tea and sweets that were traditional in the Kingdom of Angelus. Hat was hung on a hatstand, and Octavia and Raven sat down together on a sofa. After that, they had only to wait for Mrs. Smile’s arrival.

“I may have no choice but to have you marry me,” Raven murmured idly.

Octavia had just been thinking that she would like to savor the sweetness that was local to this harbor town. She nearly spat out her tea.

“Wh-Why would that be the case?”

“Well, if the Phantom Thief, Crow, steals this doll, the mystery will never be solved. In other words, I will never be able to clear myself of wrongdoing. In the worst case, I’ll be considered to have sold a Demonic Heirloom.”

“If the doll causing the problem were gone, then wouldn’t that just resolve the case of the daughter?!”

“Not necessarily. We’ll have lost our means of resolving it. If that happens, what will you do?”

Careful not to spill her tea, Octavia set her cup down. “I’ll break both of that cad’s legs, and I’ll do whatever it takes to catch him.”

“Ah, so you *would* go that route. Well, that’s fine. But what shall we do now?”

“Do? About what?”

“Should I introduce you as my fiancée, or as a detective?”

“As a detective, obviously! Weren’t we only supposed to be engaged if I failed to solve the case—”

“Sorry for the wait, Mr. Raven!”

A flurry of lively footsteps, and then the door was thrown open. A solidly-built lady wearing a gaudy dress hurried into the room. Her smile was strangely intense as she wheeled around to face them. For some reason, she was waving a hand fan; its many bushy feathers drew their eyes.

Octavia sat there, blinking, bemused. In contrast, Raven rose smoothly to his feet and took a graceful bow. “I must thank you for giving us a moment of your time despite your busy schedule, Mrs. Smile.”

“Really, you needn’t behave so formally. I can always make time for you, Mr. Raven. After all, we’ll be seeing a lot of each other in the future!”

“Yes. About that...”

“Although I really *am* busy,” she went on. “That being said, I’m always busy,

so if I excused myself based on that, we'd never make progress with the happy matter of this engagement! Now, then—let's start making arrangements for the future at once!"

"Before that, there's someone I need to introduce to you."

"I've already completed the necessary paperwork, so please verify it at your convenience. Of course, after that, I'll bring you and Colette together. That's right! How would you like to have dinner with her? If she hears that she's been lucky enough to be engaged to you, Mr. Raven, I'm sure she'll gladly toss that silly doll aside. Oho ho ho."

"Allow me to introduce the Lady Octavia, whom I am presently courting," Raven cut in, not to be outdone by Mrs. Smile as she rattled on.

Mrs. Smile was overcome by this riposte, and she took a moment to find her words again.

"My, my. Courting, you say... Is that with a view to marriage?"

"Yes. She is Octavia de Reine, the daughter of the Earl of Reine."

In a situation like this, a late reply was fatal. Before Octavia could get a word in, sparks were flying between Raven and Mrs. Smile. They continued the conversation without her.

"This is the first I've heard of it. Speaking of the Earl of Reine, you don't mean the one who used to work as a detective."

"Why, yes, and the Lady Octavia has just opened her office as a detective as well. Following in her grandmother's footsteps."

"My, isn't that wonderful. A noble and a working woman! As a woman, I have often been underestimated, so I would love for us to get along. But, that being the case, surely you shouldn't feel like you need to get married? If you have economic power and a position in society, a husband would only get in the way. Am I wrong?" Mrs. Smile shot a brief glance at Octavia.

She answered hurriedly, "No, I still want to get married someday."

"That's right," said Raven. "To move things along, I've paid you this visit to introduce her to you, so she can help you solve the mystery of the doll."

“My, my. Unfortunately, I’ve had to entrust that doll to the police. I am grateful that you came all this way, but it seems to have been for nothing. So please, show yourselves out. Oh, Mr. Raven—I will, of course, hold you responsible for this agreement.”

“Ah, but she is *the* Detective Octavia.” At Raven’s meaningful introduction, Mrs. Smile’s flapping fan and mouth both suddenly ground to a halt. “I know news reaches your ears quickly, Mrs. Smile. I am sure you’ve heard about the incident onboard the overnight train.”

“Well,” she replied after a moment, “I would say that I have heard rumors, at the very least. Gathering information is part of my job, after all.”

“Might this not be a good opportunity to verify those rumors?”

Waving her fan more gently now, hiding her mouth behind it, Mrs. Smile did not reply. Just for a moment, her gaze turned to Octavia, as if to inspect her.

With a cool expression, Raven continued, “I believe I heard something about a letter of announcement being left by Crow, the Phantom Thief.”

“Yes, well, it’s not as if I tried to conceal that.”

“If the present situation were to continue, Miss Colette might be seen to possess a Demonic Heirloom.”

“But that is why you shall take responsibility.”

“Society will not take that view. You will be known as the mother who bought a Demonic Heirloom for her daughter, and she will be known as a girl who was enthralled by one. And if the doll itself is stolen, then there will be nothing left to show to the inquisitors to prove her innocence. Even if it weren’t a Demonic Heirloom, we’d never know.”

Mrs. Smile was silent.

Raven turned slightly toward Octavia. “However, if we have Octavia on our side, I believe she will protect the doll from the Phantom Thief *and* solve this mystery for us. Don’t you?”

“That is,” stammered Octavia. “Well, I am a detective. But all this talk of engagement is another matter entirely.”

“You mean it can wait after the job is finished. I understand,” Raven said.

Mrs. Smile suddenly narrowed her eyes. “Mr. Raven, could it be that you promised to marry this young lady if the job went poorly?”

The corners of Raven’s mouth curled upwards. “So what if I did?”

“What do you mean, ‘So what?’ Is that not duress?! Even if you don’t consider it so.”

“Um, no,” said Octavia. “Raven really just introduced this job to me. That’s all.”

“And I wonder about that attitude of yours, as well.” Mrs. Smile’s stare left Octavia bewildered.

Raven, however, pressed on without delay. “In that case, do not concern yourself with me. Still, won’t you please allow her to pursue the mystery of the doll? You surely wouldn’t do anything to impede her work?”

Mrs. Smile raised her eyebrows, but then sighed behind her fan. “Very well, then. I’ll talk it over with the police.”

Raven quietly smiled beside Octavia, who was shocked. “I knew I could count on you to support a working woman, Mrs. Smile.”

“Well, the reasons I couldn’t refuse were stacked up against me. However, I do have some conditions, Miss Octavia.”

“Wh-What are they?”

“If you ever need more work, I shall mediate on your behalf. Therefore, if the doll should be stolen by Crow, the Phantom Thief, then you are to end your courtship with Mr. Raven. Then, Mr. Raven shall be engaged to my daughter.”

“Why would that be the result?!” Unable to grasp the flow of the conversation, Octavia butted in, thoughtless but genuine.

Mrs. Smile snapped her fan shut and glared back at Octavia. “Using an arranged marriage as insurance for a professional failure is outrageous.”

Octavia began to agree with Mrs. Smile, then thought better of it. She had certainly promised to be engaged to Raven if she couldn’t solve the mystery of

the doll, but she hadn't done so as insurance, nor under duress.

Indeed, Octavia took a step forward to defend Raven. "Y-You appear to be misapprehending things. Furthermore, having your daughter engaged to Raven if I should fail..."

"Fine by me."

"Huh?!"

Octavia turned around to see Raven grinning, apparently enjoying himself. Mrs. Smile snorted with laughter.

"My, are you quite sure? If the doll is stolen by the Phantom Thief, or if its mystery is left unsolved, you will be engaged to Colette. Are these not rather disadvantageous conditions for you?"

"Quite. In other words, Octavia will have to make every effort to see that I am not engaged to your daughter, correct? It's romantic."

Raven simply smiled, without a hint of agitation or concern. Mrs. Smile must have found this unnerving. She scowled.

He went on, "I was actually a little hesitant about our previous agreement, myself, for us to be engaged if she should fail. Just like you, Mrs. Smile, to wipe that problem away for me. Ah, shall we write up a contract?"

"Raven! Do you understand the situation? If I fail, you'll have to marry a six-year-old girl."

"You can solve the mystery. I believe in you."

For just a moment, these words pierced Octavia's heart, but she soon returned to her senses. This was just Raven indulging one of his bad habits.

"More than anything, it sounds like fun," he added.

His answer was perfectly in line with Octavia's expectations. It left her speechless. Raven was enjoying this from the bottom of his heart; his smile was so beautiful that Octavia felt a shiver go up her spine.

Raven took the lead by himself and formed a contract with Mrs. Smile. With each narrow clause they set out, Mrs. Smile checked many times to be sure of

Raven's true intentions. Finding that he was serious, in the end, she was silent.

"So this fellow wasn't a con man after all, but a gambler? Or is he just self-destructive?" Hat, who had seen and heard everything from his place in the corner of the room, now sat atop Octavia's head in shock.

Looking exhausted, Octavia replied, "I'm completely lost..."

"What's the matter, Octavia? Feeling tired?" asked Raven.

"You seem lively enough," she replied.

"Well, that's because things are starting to look more fun. Now, then! Let's go and investigate the security conditions at the trading company at once." Raven grinned, beginning to walk away.

Octavia chased after him. "Do you actually understand what you've done? Now that you've written a contract, even you won't be able to weasel your way out of this."

"Oh, I know. Mrs. Smile seems like she'd be quite hard to bear as my mother-in-law."

"Didn't you say that you believed in marrying for love?"

Raven, who was walking ahead of Octavia, stopped and turned around. Octavia also came to a stop, and they faced each other in the quiet back alley.

"Why should you feel so concerned?"

"Of course I'm concerned! To think that you might end up married because of me."

"Isn't it all the same to you? Whatever happens to me?"

Octavia nearly lost her temper, then wondered to herself why that feeling had welled up inside of her. She knew that sort of irrational anger was to be avoided; thus, taking a deep breath, she dropped her gaze and clenched her fists.

"It's important to have fun," she said after a moment. "But I do wonder about the way you behave with such disregard for yourself."

"Why, that wasn't my intention. After all, if I weren't aware of my own value,

could I have offered myself as a betting chip?”

“I’m only saying that thinking that way—the fact that you’re willing to offer *yourself* in a gamble— isn’t good.”

“You know, I was without freedom for quite a long time. Do you understand what it means to lack freedom?”

At first, Octavia thought he was obfuscating again; he was always hiding something, after all. But now, an unfamiliar, gloomy light lurked behind Raven’s eyes. As Octavia struggled to find an answer, he gave her one:

“It means not being able to use your own body, your life, your existence.”

“Don’t say ‘use’! Don’t talk about yourself as if you’re an object.”

“I’ll never put up with a life where I can’t do as I like. Never again. With that kind of life, I just can’t be myself.”

Hearing Raven’s voice drop an octave, Octavia shut her mouth.

Hat muttered, “Isn’t this fellow a nobleman? What kind of life was he living? Of course, it’s nothing to do with us...”

Hat’s words were precisely what Octavia was thinking inwardly. *In other words, it’s not my place to say anything about it...* That hazy feeling only continued to build up inside her chest.

“You really needn’t worry so much. The odds are in our favor.” Raven spoke a little more gently now, seemingly out of consideration for Octavia, who had fallen silent.

Octavia sighed deeply and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I was wrong.” She looked straight up and into Raven’s eyes; he only blinked. She went on, “If I really don’t want you and Miss Colette to be married, then I just need to solve the mystery.”

One couldn’t force others to be as one would’ve liked them to be. The only one you could change to suit your expectations was yourself. Octavia had narrowly escaped confusing one for the other.

“You...don’t want that?” he asked.

“Don’t worry. The odds are in our favor.” Octavia slipped past Raven, who looked utterly vexed, then turned around. “That’s right. Just to be absolutely clear, you don’t want to marry Miss Colette, do you?”

“Well, of course not.”

“Good to hear. Shall we go? Ah, of course, if you have other matters to attend to, feel free to go wherever you—”

“I’ll come with you,” replied Raven immediately, then looked surprised at himself. He then put a hand over his mouth, and his gaze wandered away from Octavia. “That is, if you don’t mind.”

“Isn’t it a bit late to say that? Haven’t you followed me up till now, without so much as a by-your-leave?” Octavia smiled at Raven, who had the eyes of a lost child, and then started walking.

First of all, we’ll check the doll in question. For me, one look will be enough to tell. If it really were an Imperial Heirloom, she would have to register it before it turned into a Demonic Heirloom. She could think about how to explain its whereabouts later. The real problem would be if it turned out not to be one of the Heirlooms. If that were the case, then the supernatural phenomena would’ve had to have been the work of a human. That would mean there was a culprit out there somewhere.

Furthermore, that girl, she mused. What’s going on with her? Just what is this doll capable of?

Octavia could have checked with Hat, if Raven hadn’t been walking behind her, off to one side. He was following her timidly, almost like a baby bird, so she felt reluctant to drive him away. Moreover, if the doll they were going to see really were an Imperial Heirloom, she would be interested to know the item’s provenance and how it had ended up in Raven’s hands. All that being said, in the first place, she needed confirmation.

“Entry beyond this point is forbidden, except for authorized persons—”

“We were sent here by Mrs. Smile. Now let us in.”

The guards blocking the path outside the Smile Trading Company headquarters swiftly made way for them, and they went inside. At the

reception desk on the first floor, Raven presented the documents bearing Mrs. Smile's signature and direct written approval. They were informed that they should proceed to the top floor, the fifth story. After ascending in an elevator of a slightly outdated design, they arrived directly at an exhibition hall; there wasn't even a corridor leading from the elevator. Constables worked to board up the many windows.

"Block the stairs, too," said a man who was not wearing a constable's uniform. "Make it so not even a rat can slip inside. Make sure someone is always posted on the roof as well, and remain vigilant—" He broke off, fixing a sharp glare on Octavia and Raven as they stepped out of the elevator. "Oi."

The man was tall. The top button of his shirt was undone, and his jacket was unkempt. By his coarse manner of speech, he did not seem to belong to the trading company. Still, he was handsome, in a rough sort of way.

He scrutinized Octavia with his sharp, almond-shaped eyes, then clicked his tongue. "This floor's marked off limits, innit? Even to employees of the company. Now, sling yer hook. Go home."

"I am Octavia de Reine. I'm a detective investigating this matter at Mrs. Smile's request."

"Detective?" he pronounced slowly, scowling in suspicion, then scratched the back of his neck. "First there's a doll like something out of an 'orror story, and then a phantom thief. Now, you're telling me there's a detective? You're 'avin' a laugh."

"You must be Inspector Baker, the one who's in charge of this investigation."

"Inspector?" Raven declared.

Octavia frowned. He did look rather young, for an inspector.

The man produced a police notebook from the inside pocket of his shabby jacket, then opened it and showed it to them. *Ashton Baker*. There was a small black-and-white photo of him, alongside which his department and rank were clearly written.

"Satisfied now, Lady Detective?"

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. That’s very impressive for such a young man.”

“Thanks. And what about it? If you want to play detective, can’t you do it somewhere else, young lady? Me, I’m working here. This isn’t a game!”

“She’s working as well.”

Raven showed Ashton the letter of introduction from Mrs. Smile, but he only responded with a snort of laughter.

“An’ who’re you?”

“Raven L. Osvard.”

“Osvard. Ah, so you’re the high and mighty marquis everyone’s been talking about.” Ashton took out a cigarette, lit it, and then blew smoke in Raven’s direction. “I wasn’t brought up right, see. Can’t quite wrap me brain around the lofty games of the aristocracy.”

“I see,” said Raven, after a pause. “I feel like you and I will get along well.” Raven continued smiling—the corners of his mouth curled up even more—but the look in his eyes was not nearly as friendly as his words.

“Stop it, Raven. Sorry, Inspector Baker. We don’t mean to get in your way. We’d just like you to let us have a look at the doll. Would you mind?”

“And if I say no?”

“I think you’ll soon find yourself to be very busy. There might be an explosion somewhere, or a series of robberies,” Octavia said with a straight face.

Ashton’s eyes widened.

This was not a very big town. It was hard to imagine that there was anyone besides Inspector Baker in charge of criminal cases. There was nothing else for it—in order to draw his attention away from the doll, they’d have to create “unsolved cases” all throughout the town, albeit without causing any casualties.

Ashton burst out laughing. “What are you on about? Are you announcing a crime spree? Well, if it’s just a look at the doll you want, that’s fine. I’d like to hear what His Lordship the marquis over there has to say, anyway.”

“I don’t believe I have any business with you,” Raven retorted.

“Oh, but weren’t you the one who gave her the doll?” Ashton’s tone was casual, but there was no smile in his eyes.

Neither was there any in Raven’s, even as he grinned in response. “I suppose I was.”

“Raven—”

Hat cut her off. “Octavia, leave him be. If we stand here listening to these fools, we’ll be here until the sun sets.”

What Hat said was absolutely right. Octavia gave up on interceding between the two men.

She spun around, surveying the hall. She discovered a display case at the back of the room and approached it. Underneath the relatively large glass case was a solitary doll, posed so that it was sitting down.

It was about the size of a baby and looked like a little girl. Above its wide blue eyes was a head of curly flaxen hair. It wore a bonnet with a black ribbon tied underneath its chin, and a black dress decorated with white frills covered its body. Perhaps it was only because of all the black, but the doll’s attire put Octavia in mind of funeral-wear. Even its tiny leather shoes were black.

“Octavia, this isn’t one of them.”

“Right.” Octavia muttered what Hat wanted to say: “It’s not an Imperial Heirloom.”

“What did you say?” Ashton, who had followed after Octavia, raised his voice.

Raven, who stood beside him, also furrowed his brow. “What is the meaning of this, Octavia?”

“This doll is not an Imperial Heirloom. Nor is it a Demonic Heirloom, naturally.”

“Huh? How can you tell?” asked Ashton.

“My grandmother taught me how. Haven’t you heard of the Lady Detective, the Earl of Reine? I’m her granddaughter.” *If anyone asks you, give them this answer*, her grandmother had said, and Octavia had replied with the very words she had taught her.

“So that’s why you’re a detective,” groaned Ashton, who must have been aware of her grandmother. Her grandmother had been a woman of great repute, owing to her work with the Demonic Heirlooms; it had even brought her toe to toe with the inquisition. Ashton would no doubt mistake her ability to identify an Imperial Heirloom at a glance as evidence of the wisdom that her grandmother had bestowed upon her.

Octavia shot a glance at Raven, who was standing next to him. “At the very least, it would appear that you didn’t foist an Imperial Heirloom upon this child.”

“Of course I didn’t! But then, what about those supernatural occurrences?”

“Though it isn’t an Imperial Heirloom, some kind of curse seems to have been placed on this doll. That may have been what caused it to move on its own.”

“Now, now, wait a minute, wait a minute, you two,” interrupted Ashton, who had been listening to their conversation from the sidelines. He grabbed each of them firmly by a shoulder.

Raven looked displeased. “Having my shoulder touched by a man is really not to my taste. Also, take your other hand off of Octavia.”

“Now, look here. I don’t believe in such rubbish as Demonic Heirlooms, in the first place.”

“Is that right?”

Now that Raven had yanked Ashton’s hand back off her shoulder, Octavia was able to turn and face the inspector again.

“Well, of course not,” he said. “You expect me to believe there are tools from a country that collapsed hundreds of years ago, with powers that modern science can’t explain? Not only that, but they can drag us into the world of the dead? That’s too much even for a fairy tale. I even doubt whether our queen really has wings growing out of her back.”

“You’ll be executed for treason.”

“I don’t believe in anything but what I can see with my own eyes. If you don’t like what I’m saying, complain to the angels. They hardly ever come down and

show themselves to our lot below, anyway.”

“But don’t you believe in the foundation myth of the Kingdom of Angelus?”

Ashton shrugged his shoulders. “Ah, yer talkin’ about the tale of the *evil empire* that aimed to conquer heaven, drawing the anger of God, ain’t you? The one whose people were wiped out by the ancestors of the angels—the ancestors of Her Majesty, the present-day queen—in a single night? Oh, aye, and then the tools of that empire, floatin’ in the sky, were scattered throughout the world. ‘Course, those mysterious tools, with their bloody *amazin’ powers*, turned into the perilous Demonic Heirlooms, seeking to upend the balance between the worlds of the living and the dead in order to restore the empire. Now, Her Majesty’s set about sealing them away, retrieving them through her inquisition.”

The true story was that the tools had been cursed by the mad god, since they’d cooperated with the angels to subdue him. That was why they’d become the Demonic Heirlooms. Still, as far as the official story went, what Ashton said was correct.

Ashton scratched his head irritably. “Well, the inquisition does exist. I ain’t saying it’s a total lie. But can you really believe that things like that are still around? In this day and age, when science can stand in for magic? What do you think, Lord Marquis?”

“Whether I believe it or not, the fact is that inquisitors who possess magic are around, cleaning up cases like this one. Isn’t that evidence enough that the Imperial Heirlooms still exist and are dangerous?”

“It’s because you swallow tall tales like that that the inquisitors can walk around like they own the place.”

Octavia blinked at this retort from Ashton. *Ah, I see*, Raven’s smile seemed to say. “Now that you mention it, the police and the inquisitors don’t get along, do they? I hear there’s no end of disputes over jurisdiction. Could it be that you snapped back during one of the inquisition’s investigations, and you found yourself relegated to a regional post?”

“Shut up, you. Anyway, I don’t believe in such things as the Heirlooms. I don’t believe in them, but I know there are people who do believe and do stupid

things because of it.”

Although he had doubtless never seen an Heirloom himself, his flexible way of thinking betrayed a curious level of understanding of them.

Ashton folded his arms and looked at Octavia then. His expression was serious. “Just a moment ago, didn’t you say something about this not being an Heirloom? You’re sure?”

“Yeah. There’s no doubt.”

“If it’s not, then what makes this thing worth so much that Crow, the Phantom Thief himself, left a letter announcing he was going to steal it? Ain’t it just a normal doll?”

At Ashton’s glare, Raven glanced away to look at the doll.

At once, he gazed at it in clear astonishment. “No. This isn’t the doll I sold her.”

Raven hurried over to the display case and pressed himself up against the glass.

Octavia exchanged glances with Ashton and turned back to Raven, who was staring at the doll unblinkingly. She asked, “What are you talking about, Raven?”

“The model is the same, but there are subtle differences. The pattern of the lace on its sleeves, for example, and the bow in the ribbon as well.”

“Ain’t that something the owner, Miss Colette, might’ve done? Changing its clothes when she played with it?”

“Would she go to the trouble of creating a dress that was utterly identical except for the lace pattern?”

Ashton was holding back laughter.

With a look of certainty in his eyes, Raven continued, “The color of its eyes is different, too. I’m sure they were darker before.”

“With such a small difference like that, you’re probably just seeing it wrong.”

“I don’t make such mistakes. Do you mind if I open the case to make sure?”

At Raven asking him a favor, a sour look came over Ashton's face.

Octavia added, "Raven has a good memory. It would be best to let him check. If what he says is true, it means that someone swapped out the doll."

"All right. But just a look. Don't try any funny stuff. Oi, open it up," said Ashton, instructing one of his subordinates to open the glass case. He took the doll in his own hands and carried it over to Raven.

Raven's eyes narrowed. He motioned for Ashton to turn the doll around as he looked it all over, then said, definitively, "There's no doubt in my mind. This is a different doll. But why..."

"You don't mean... No, it couldn't be—it's already been swapped out by the Phantom Thief?"

"There's no way," said Ashton.

"How can you be so sure?"

Ashton had spoken quickly. Now, at Octavia's query—albeit after making a face—he took a look around the room. "I need to question you," he said. "Come with me."

Ashton chose a meeting room on the fourth floor of the trading company's building. It appeared that the police were using the whole fifth and fourth floors for their investigation and for security.

"The truth is, the letter of announcement from the Phantom Thief is a fake," said Ashton in a hushed voice, just as Octavia and Raven were sitting down at opposite corners of the desks they had pushed together in the center of the room.

Octavia blinked vacantly for a moment, then cried, "A fake?!"

"Oi, keep your voice down! For the time being, we're keeping mum about this information. It's related to our investigation!"

"S-Sorry." Octavia hurriedly covered her mouth. Finally, she shifted from her half-seated posture to actually sit down. "B-But what do you mean? A fake..."

Ashton rubbed the back of his neck. He seemed unsure about whether or not he should answer.

Beside her, Octavia could sense Raven smile suddenly. “Perhaps it’s that the letter was different from the others he’s left?”

Ashton was rubbing the back of his neck, but his hand froze. He narrowed his eyes at Raven. “How’d you know?”

“Letters from Crow, the Phantom Thief, are famous for one unique characteristic, aren’t they? Presently, since we have received nothing but the letter, it’s the only thing one could use to make that judgment.”

“Is that right?” asked Octavia.

In response, Ashton opened his mouth in resignation. “Well, I suppose there are those who already know, but...just as he says, the Phantom Thief’s letters have a particular characteristic. I guess you could call it an anti-counterfeit measure, a gimmick. If someone who possesses magic holds one of his cards, a pattern of wings will start glowing on it, like if light were shining through it.” After saying this, Ashton took a card out of his pocket and set it down on the desk in front of him.

Tonight, at nine o’clock, I will come and help myself to Miss Colette’s doll.

Crow, the Phantom Thief

“This was the letter we received this time. We do at least have someone on the police force with magical knowledge. When we had that fellow hold the card, it didn’t glow. Looking closely, the design is different, too. So that’s how we know it’s a fake.”

“I also possess some magical power. May I touch it?”

“Go ahead.”

Octavia gently touched the edge of the card. It didn’t glow.

“That’s how we judged it. Also, the handwriting is different.”

“Certainly, this lettering does seem different from what I saw on the train.”

To Detective Octavia, with love. Those words, unbearably humiliating, were seared into Octavia’s eyes. Her shoulders fell.

“So, he isn’t coming after all...”

“You sound almost disappointed.”

“I want to be the one to catch Crow, the Phantom Thief. But if the man himself isn’t coming, this isn’t worth discussing.”

“Oh, and why do you want to catch him?”

“To make him take responsibility as a man!”

“Huh?” Ashton, was utterly engrossed, staring across at Octavia, his elbows on the table.

Atop Octavia’s head, Hat fretted, “Hold on and calm down, you useless girl,” but she paid him no mind. Clenching her fists, she said in a firm voice, “Of all things, that cad stole a kiss from my lips!”

“Huh?!”

“After he did *that* to me, I can’t let him get away, can I?! I swear, I will catch that man—”

“Octavia, calm down. You’ll only embarrass the inspector, talking about that,” Raven warned, sitting beside Octavia.

At his words, she managed to regain a modicum of composure. Perhaps her sense of caution was stimulated.

“Sorry. Those were my personal feelings.”

“Nah... Well, that was so, uh, *personal*, I suppose, that I can’t really comment.”

“We understand that this card is a fake. Certainly, the Phantom Thief had nicer handwriting than this.”

All of a sudden, Raven seemed to choke on something. Octavia turned to look at him in surprise.

“Are you all right?”

“N-Nnnn... S-Sorry. It seems that something got caught in my throat. Sh-
Shall we return to the matter at hand?”

“Please do,” implored Ashton, with a sigh.

Octavia took another look at the fake letter. “So then, who was it who sent this letter? Are the police investigating that?”

“Well, after a fashion. By the way, I don’t suppose you two would know anything? Have you heard anything from Mrs. Smile or her daughter, maybe?”

“I haven’t heard anything,” said Octavia.

“I haven’t heard anything from Mrs. Smile, either,” said Raven, “except that I’ll have to marry her daughter as penance for selling her that troublesome doll.”

At Raven’s answer, Ashton wore a dumbfounded expression. “That’s going a bit far, isn’t it? I reckon I sympathize with you, just a bit. Miss Colette’s only six years old, ain’t she?”

“Thank you kindly. But if the doll was, in fact, switched, that’s a completely different story.”

“Right. There is that. I nearly forgot. You *are* sure about that?” His elbows still on the desk, Ashton leaned forward.

With a somewhat cool expression, Raven replied, “I’m sure. If we can find out who it was that brought that doll in, I’m sure we’ll also uncover the motive of whoever impersonated Crow, the Phantom Thief.”

“Can you trace the history of the doll?”

“It’s not as if I can’t, but it would take too much time. Crow’s announcement said tonight, didn’t it? If the article itself is taken, the people involved will be able to make any number of excuses. Right now, our most reliable strategy would be to catch whoever is impersonating Crow, or else make sure that the doll isn’t stolen.”

Ashton leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. “After all this, that’s what it comes to. I’ve got to say, I’m not fond of waiting for my opponent to make his move.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do besides that, Raven? I’m sure you can think of something.”

At Octavia's question, Raven blinked. He worked his jaw slightly, pondering it. "Right, yes. If we could find out whether or not Miss Colette and Mrs. Smile know that the doll was switched, it might provide us with a hint."

"That's right. It wouldn't be strange if they'd noticed something when the doll was switched."

"Of course, there is the possibility that those two are the main culprits."

Octavia tilted her head, puzzled, but then caught on. "That's right! The matter of Colette's marriage to you."

It would make sense as a motive. It would have been difficult for the six-year-old Colette to plot by herself, but it was not at all unthinkable for Mrs. Smile to have come up with it.

Raven nodded back at Octavia. "There must be some benefit to the fake Phantom Thief as well, for the doll to be worth stealing. If we're suspecting anyone who might benefit from it, we must suspect Mrs. Smile. It would have been easy for her to swap out the doll."

"In that case," mused Ashton, "the doll wouldn't be stolen because it's a Demonic Heirloom, but to stop anyone finding out the channels by which it was obtained, innit?"

"In the first place, that doll was not valuable enough to go to the trouble of stealing. Perhaps the reason the culprit pretended to be Crow was to lend credibility to the rumor that the doll was an Heirloom."

"Which would suddenly make Mrs. Smile look suspicious, right?"

At this inference from Ashton, Octavia looked up. "That may be a premature conclusion," she put in, hesitant.

"Oh? D'you know somethin'?"

"Ah, well—while there is some benefit to Mrs. Smile, the rumor that she might have a Demonic Heirloom would naturally be a problem for her, right? The inquisition might come to investigate her."

Mrs. Smile was responsible for a trading company. In business, the most important thing was trust. One would surely want to avoid scandal as much as

possible.

Placing a finger on his chin, Raven pondered this. “I suppose that’s true. It would also involve her daughter in a scandal. In reality, Mrs. Smile has been trying to solve the doll’s mystery and prevent scandal. That’s why she hired you. That means that we should suspect anyone with a grudge against Mrs. Smile, instead. Or else, competitors of the Smile Trading Company.”

“The police have already thought of that. We tried making a list, at least.”

“Might we take a look at it? If anyone who might have been able to obtain that doll is on the list, I’ll know. It was handmade by a craftsman, so it’s not the kind of doll you can get your hands on easily. If you didn’t have the right contacts, I don’t think you could get it. Also, it must be someone familiar to Mrs. Smile, someone who could have seen the doll she gave her daughter.”

At Raven’s suggestion, Ashton sighed in resignation. “If that’s how it’s going to be, I guess I’ll accept your cooperation. I’m free until the Phantom Thief arrives anyway.”

“C-Could I be excused for a moment?” Octavia raised her hand, fidgeting a little. Ashton narrowed his eyes. Realizing that he was growing suspicious of her, Octavia hurriedly added, “I’d like to go and hear what Miss Colette has to say. I’ll let you know what she says. The two of you can investigate here. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Your meddling could put me in a difficult position.”

“But we’re running out of time. Splitting up is bound to be more effective.” *Whatever it takes, I want to act alone. There’s something I want to confirm.* As Octavia was trying to convince Ashton, Raven spoke up from beside her.

“That might be for the best. If we men tagged along to question her, it’s likely she’d be too frightened to talk to us.”

“Eh? You’re not coming with me?!” cried Octavia.

“I really think you’ve misjudged me,” grumbled Raven, but then he grinned. “You’ve thought of something, haven’t you? Whatever it is, you should give it a shot—you’re the detective, after all.”

Why did Octavia get the feeling that Raven wasn't so much being supportive as letting her go for his own purposes? Still, instead of arguing that she hadn't misjudged him, she quietly nodded.

As Octavia stepped outside, she saw that the sun was beginning to set. Walking briskly along the gravel-covered back alley, she furtively asked Hat, who sat atop her head, "Can you trace it?"

"That's impossible. I haven't registered it yet. If the Heirloom itself were willing, that would be one thing, but at present, there's no sign of it."

"Anyway, let's have a look around here. If we don't find it before anyone else does, and talk to it... Well, after we're done with that, we'll hear what Miss Colette has to say."

With Mrs. Smile's manor in the corner of her eye, she climbed the slope with the flower garden. Beyond that, there was only the lighthouse. There was no sign that anyone was there. Neither were there any other buildings, so Octavia had a wide field of view. If anyone were lurking around there, they would be easy to spot. The flowers and grass were kept short as well, so even if something so light as a doll happened to have fallen there, one wouldn't miss it. If Octavia were to complain about anything, it would be that the sun setting over the sea was dazzling her just a bit.

She'd still found no sign of anyone else when she arrived at the lighthouse. Glancing up to the top of the lighthouse, Octavia began searching for the entrance.

"Do we have a tool that can open locks?"

"You mean the all-opening key? That tool was special. The Kingdom of Angelus destroyed it a long time ago. In other words, we'll have to open it by force."

"I'd like to avoid as much fuss as possible. Let's just hope that the door isn't locked."

After running a circuit around the perimeter of the lighthouse, Octavia finally saw someone. The person's shadow looked very long with the light of the

evening sun shining over the hill. Octavia quickly hid herself in the shadow of the lighthouse.

She blinked upon recognizing the owner of that long shadow. “Miss Colette?”

Startled, the young girl turned around. Had she slipped away from the mansion again? Upon seeing the doll the girl clutched to her chest as if it were a precious thing, Octavia took a step forward. The moment she did, Colette dashed away.

“After her, Octavia! That’s the doll!”

Almost tripping and tumbling down the hill as she descended it, Octavia leapt at Colette from behind. Octavia’s sudden appearance overhead startled Colette; she stopped in her tracks, then tried to turn around in a hurry. Octavia seized her by the arms and lifted her up.

“Let go of me! Moron! Child molester! Pervert!”

“How lamentable. Where did a little girl like her learn such words?” muttered Hat.

“If you do anything mean to Colette, I’ll tell on you to the coppers!”

“Won’t you be the one arrested by the coppers?” asked Octavia. “With that doll you’re holding?”

Colette, who had been thrashing at Octavia with her arms and legs, suddenly stopped. Instead, she now mumbled, garbled, “Th-This is...not the same one we gave to the coppers...”

“Then what are you planning on doing? If they find you, they’ll find out that there are two dolls. Or else they’ll think this is the one the Phantom Thief is after and confiscate it.”

“Ann is just a normal doll! She’s Colette’s friend!”

“Ann. I see. So you’ve given her a name. What a lovely name. She must have been pleased.”

Colette looked up at Octavia, surprised. Octavia slowly lowered her tiny body down on one of the flower beds. Then she crouched down to bring her eyes level with the little girl’s.

“Let’s keep this just between us. I want to save Ann. You know Ann’s secret, don’t you?”

Colette squeezed the doll, Ann, even more tightly, and stared at Octavia. She seemed to be trying to discern something.

“Hey, Octavia.” Hat seemed to want to say something.

“Ann is broken... No, she’s sick,” said Octavia truthfully, ignoring Hat.

Colette seized upon this with a shocked expression. “Sick? So you are sick, after all, Ann.”

“That’s right. Probably in order to protect you, she’s been using up her strength. She’s turned into a doll more often recently, hasn’t she?”

Colette’s large eyes grew as wide as they could go. She looked down, staring at the ground. “You won’t call me strange, will you?”

“I won’t.”

“You won’t call Ann a Demonic Heirloom, will you? Or something bad like that?”

“I won’t. Ann is my friend, too,” said Octavia firmly.

Colette stared steadily at Octavia, as if sizing her up. “Then you must be Colette’s friend, too.”

“Hm? Right. I suppose I must be.”

“Be clearer about that, since you’re involving her in this,” cautioned Hat.

“Th-Then I’ll let you work together with me! Since you want to help Ann. This will be a top secret mission. We’ll keep it a secret even from Mother!” declared the young girl with all the arrogance befitting a child. Octavia held out her little finger.

“All right. It’s a promise. Let’s make it a pinky promise.”

“What a great attitude! Well, I suppose I’ll let you hear what I have to say. But, um...who are you, lady?”

“Octavia. Octavia de Reine.”

Dusk was setting in around them. After completing their pinky promise, Octavia stood back up, and introduced herself, standing in the flower garden dyed red by the setting sun.

“I’m a detective.”

By the time Octavia had surreptitiously delivered Colette back to the mansion and returned to the trading company, the sun had long since set.

“There’s only one hour left until the time the Phantom Thief announced in his letter. Now, run, you stupid girl!” commanded Hat.

“I’m running! I can’t exactly fly instead; I’d stand out like a sore thumb!”

The entrance was already surrounded by police. As soon as Octavia came in, someone called her name. “Octavia!” It was Raven, who looked relieved. “Thank goodness. You took some time getting back, so I thought something might have happened.”

“S-Sorry, Raven. There was still time to spare, so I really thought it would be all right.”

“See here, Octavia. If we were dealing with Crow, the Phantom Thief, he probably would arrive at the stated time; with an impostor, that won’t necessarily be the case,” said Raven with a serious expression, and at first, Octavia accepted this.

“You’re right, I really should have,” she began, then stopped. “Wait. Is the Phantom Thief well-known for being right on time?”

“That’s what the rumors say.”

“Doesn’t this fellow know a bit too much about the Phantom Thief?” Hat muttered from atop Octavia’s head.

Hearing this, she tried staring steadily at Raven.

Raven chuckled slightly, noticing her stare. “What’s the matter? Am I so fascinating?”

“No. Of course you aren’t. I was merely thinking about how you look suspicious no matter what you do.”

“Am I so suspicious? Perhaps being judged like this is its own sort of fun.”

Octavia frowned, and Raven smiled mischievously in return. Octavia couldn't trust this attitude of his, the way he always seemed to be enjoying himself.

Suddenly, looking puzzled, Raven said, “I wonder why you always seem so cautious around me. It's not as if I've done anything to you.”

“Well, the thing about that is...” *Why, indeed?* Unable to process this unexpected response, Octavia put a hand over her heart.

“It's because you really *are* suspicious of him, Octavia. Don't let your guard down,” whispered Hat.

“But...” Thoughtless, Octavia had been about to speak to Hat in front of other people. She hurriedly shut her mouth. Raven, who had already turned to walk away, apparently hadn't heard them. She breathed a sigh of relief. In her heart, however, the fog of confusion continued to spread.

He certainly hasn't done anything to me, but whenever I'm around him, I keep my guard up, as if he might do something. I'm confident that I wouldn't be fooled by him, so why is that?

However hard she stared at Raven's back, the answer never came. Raven started to climb the stairs ahead of her. Apparently, use of the elevator was forbidden right now. This was probably for security reasons.

“Have there been any developments on your end?” asked Octavia, following. “Have you learned anything about the impostor of Crow, the Phantom Thief?”

Raven replied, “We've managed to narrow down the list of suspects. But in the end, we still don't have the time or the people to investigate them at random.”

Ashton waved a hand at Octavia and Raven as they reached the fifth floor. “Oh, so you're back. Was it a fruitful harvest?”

“Do your best to pull the wool over his eyes, Octavia.”

At this warning from Hat, Octavia pulled back her chin, approached Ashton, and nodded. “Miss Colette has realized that the dolls were swapped.”

“Huh? At this late stage, you're telling me that Mrs. Smile is our prime

suspect?”

“No, that’s not it. Miss Colette is a victim. It seems that the doll Raven obtained was stolen. Of all things, it seems that she witnessed someone sneak into her room and swap the dolls. Thinking it was just a bad dream, she couldn’t even tell her mother. She said that the original had probably already been destroyed.”

For what was to come, it was better if everyone else thought that the doll had been destroyed. In reality, it was broken, so it wasn’t really a lie.

Ashton screwed up his face. “Then who was it that stole the doll? Did Miss Colette see who it was?”

“She said she couldn’t tell, but we can pinpoint the date it was stolen. Miss Colette says that it was the day after her birthday.”

“The very next day? That’s pretty quick. That means...”

“There was someone who knew beforehand that Miss Colette would be receiving that doll as a gift,” said Raven quietly.

At that very moment, there was a dramatic crashing sound, and then all the lights went out at once.

“What the devil?! Don’t tell me he’s already...”

“Oi, get the lights back on! Hurry up!” yelled Ashton at the constables who stood quaking around him. Clicking his tongue, he took a lighter out of his inside jacket pocket. With a firm click, it produced a tiny flame; he held it out in front of the glass case that had contained the doll.

Ashton’s strained voice was almost drowned out by the *bong* of a nearby grandfather clock. “Oi, you’ve got to be joking.”

On top of the shattered glass case there stood a doll.

Hat cried, “Don’t tell me it’s time for dolls to start running around?!”

Moving its mouth awkwardly, the doll let out a shrill cry of laughter. “Hee hee hee!” At the same time, a gale blew through the room, even though all the doors and windows were definitely shut. The wind shattered the windows from inside.

“Hee hee hee!”

With a never-ending scream, the doll ran straight for the nearest window and jumped out of it.

Leaning out of the empty window frame, Octavia clicked her tongue. “I’ll go after it!”

“W-Wait a minute, you’ve got to be joking! A doll can’t move by itself.”

“Didn’t I tell you? That doll is cursed!”

“After it, Octavia!” cried Raven, seizing Ashton by the shoulder before he could stop Octavia.

Looking back at Raven, Octavia nodded firmly in response. Grimacing, Octavia placed a foot on the window frame. “I’m counting on you, Raven!”

“Oi, you may have magical powers, but this is the fifth floor...”

“For a detective, this is nothing!” declared Octavia, and jumped out of the window. She landed on the roof of the building across the street and followed the trail left by the doll’s magic.

Atop her head, Hat grumbled, “However you look at it, you claiming that was nothing ‘for a detective’ sounded a bit forced.”

“I’ve already discussed the fact that I have magic, so it’s fine. There it is, Hat!” She spied the doll under the light of the moon, flying straight to its destination like a bullet. The doll was headed for Mrs. Smile’s mansion. It was far enough away that she couldn’t be sure of catching up to it.

Now the doll was pressed up against a window. Octavia recognized the location of that room. It was Colette’s room. Its target appeared to be Miss Colette after all.

“Hat, go get it!”

“Huh?! I-I’m really not cut out for fighting—” Drawing the doll’s attention would be enough. Octavia took Hat off her head, imbued him with magic, then hurled him at the doll. “Ohhh, Octavia, damn you!”

Just as expected, the doll suddenly halted its motion. Then, a rigid wall of

magical energy appeared in front of the doll, deflecting Hat. With a pitiful moan, the deflected Hat plummeted down into the courtyard.

Following his descent, Octavia also touched down in the courtyard.

“Y-You, damn you... Throwing my omniscient, omnipotent self like a stone!”

“Thanks to you, we were able to slow it down. We’ve caught up to it.”

“I still protest, in no uncertain terms! We tools will form a union and go on strike!”

“Y-You.” The doll spoke, turning around to face Octavia.

Hat also suddenly stopped wailing and thrashing, and stared at the doll. “I thought it was more than a mere doll, but it can talk as well?”

“P-Persistent.” *Ker-crack*, came a strange sound. A sound like bones breaking. The doll continued to emit clicking sounds, and its joints bent backwards. Its arms and legs began to grow in length. A girl was emerging from this transformation, and Octavia recognized her.

It was the girl who had carried Colette on her back in the flower garden. The doll continued to turn into a human. It was almost like an Imperial Heirloom.

Hat, realizing the same thing, cried, “This *thing*! Could it be what is known as an imitation Heirloom?”

Eliza had mentioned the existence of imitations. If it really were one, their surroundings would not be left unscathed. It wouldn’t be so strange if it had the power to drag them to the other side.

“Ann?” With the sound of an innocent voice, the window at the doll’s back opened.

The worst possible timing. Just as Octavia tried to kick off from the ground, the blast raged around her. This was the doll’s doing.

Unable to move, Octavia cried, “No, that isn’t Ann! She’s a fake, Colette!”

“You have a wish, don’t you?” The grinning doll extended its toward Colette, whose eyes were wide open. “Wish. Wish, wish, wish, wish! I’ll grant it, I will!”

In that, too, it was trying to resemble an Heirloom. Clicking her tongue,

Octavia cried out again, “Don’t do it! Stop, Colette! If you do that, you’ll become the user!”

“Now, tell me your wish!”

With the blast raging around her, the fake Ann’s eyes were wide open. She was about to open her mouth. She seemed intent on drawing the words out of Colette, by suggestion or any means necessary.

It was at that moment that another voice spoke up. “Colette, you mustn’t.” Another, identical girl in rags appeared from overhead and knocked the doll down to the ground. She then looked up at the girl standing at the window.

But it was already too late. In front of Octavia and the girl, Colette spoke her wish:

“I want to be your friend.”

“Tee hee hee hee!” Together with the doll’s shrill laughter, another world billowed out from behind Colette.



Colette had no friends. This was because her mother was “a very important person.” Though a woman, her mother was greatly admired in the town for having built such a fortune, and so both adults and children were kind to Colette. Yet no one would invite her to play—they were afraid, thinking, *If I play with the girl from that grand house over there and she gets hurt, what will I do?* and, *If I should offend her, I’ll be in a lot of trouble.* In the first place, the town had few children, so dolls had always been Colette’s friends.

Her mother had always said things would be different when she became an adult, so she shouldn’t feel lonely. All the same, Colette had never stopped wishing.

I want a friend.

“From today, your name will be Ann, okay? Isn’t it a lovely name?”

And so this was Colette’s world: giving names to dolls, playing with them in the flower garden, and making wishes she could tell to no one else.

“I wish you could become my real friend. We’d make flower crowns together

and play.”

It shouldn’t have been possible for saying this to change anything, but the doll she had just received for her birthday was different. It began to glow.

She had heard fairy tales about terrifying instruments in the world that could make the wishes of humans come true. But the doll, who had transformed into a girl, spoke thusly:

“Well, then, shall we make flower crowns?”

Colette was shocked. However, excitement soon overcame the shock. She couldn’t think for one moment that the girl—who now silently awaited her reply—was one of the terrifying instruments she had heard about in fairy tales.

“Are you human?” she asked, hesitant. “Or a doll?”

“I am a doll. What is it that you desire?”

This wasn’t, seemingly, one of those entities that vanished after granting one’s wish. After thinking for a short while, Colette smiled, confident that she would not be tricked.

“If you’ll be Colette’s friend, then one day I’ll tell you my wish.”

“Friend,” repeated the doll. “Confirming definition. Friends are two beings of equal status, who make allowances for one another as they communicate. Is this definition acceptable?”

“You’ve made it so hard that I can’t tell. Friends play together. They make flower crowns together!”

“Understood.”

So it was. The two began working together to make some messy things that could hardly be called flower crowns.

“Are you happy for your name to be Ann?” When Colette checked this with Ann, who was silent, focused on making flower crowns. The answer she received was unexpected.

“I do not know, as I do not know who my master is now.”

“Isn’t it Colette?”

“No, it is not you. You are my friend.”

Colette was a little shocked to be told so definitively that she was not the doll’s owner. Still, it would have been strange to call someone both a friend and a master, and so Colette accepted this right away. She asked, “Do you want to see your master?”

“Yes, but presently, I am lacking proper maintenance, and may not be able to distinguish...”

Then, just when Colette thought she had her answer, she heard a *pop*, and Ann had turned back into a doll.

Colette was startled, frozen to the spot. Then, before her eyes, still wearing an unfinished flower crown, Ann murmured, “I do not seem to be functioning quite right. There is a possibility that I might have malfunctioned.”

“D-Does that mean you’re in trouble? Will you break?”

“One day. After all, dolls do not talk.”

Ann’s simple answer left Colette speechless.

“Is it impossible, after all, for a doll to be a friend?” asked Ann, still in the form of a doll. But no matter what anyone else said, she was Colette’s friend. So that they might eat together, Colette took her back to the mansion. Having placed Ann in her own room, she went to sneak some sweets out of the kitchen, but when she returned to her room, she heard the sound of someone leaving in a hurry.

What’s going on? Colette thought as she tried to peer in through the doorway. Then, all of a sudden, she was dragged inside the room, and *something* tightened around her neck. Her eyes wide, Colette saw a doll that looked just like Ann. She still remembered the fear she had felt when her eyes met the doll’s, glowing in the pitch-black room, its small, bloodless hands wrapped around her throat. She couldn’t even call for help.

Then, she saw another doll kick that doll away—it was Ann.

The doll that had attacked Colette tumbled to the ground after it had been kicked away. Now, though, it bit down on Ann’s arm, glaring at her with its

glowing eyes. Colette, who could no longer even bring herself to scream, saw the other doll tear Ann's arm off; it fell to the floor before her eyes.

In spite of this, Ann kicked the doll away once more.

As it crashed to the floor, the strange doll must have understood its circumstances to be unfavorable. It ran out of the room through a gap in the door and fled.

"Are you unharmed?" asked Ann.

"Ann, you," stumbled Colette. "Y-Your arm!"

"I am all right. With this amount of damage, I am capable...of self...repair." Ann transformed once again from a doll into a human, and her arm was restored.

But Colette felt uneasy after hearing Ann's uneven tone of voice, and she threw her arms around her. "What's wrong, Ann?"

"Confirmation of magical contamination," recited Ann. "A counterfeit. Danger. Moving into emergency evacuation mode. Establishing suspected target. Partial interruption to functionality. Restarting. *Please wait one moment.*" With a crackling sound, Ann instantly turned back into a doll.

Colette hurried over and picked up Ann, who was gazing up at the ceiling. Clutching her to her chest once again, she cried, "Ann, it's all right. Just hold on, Ann!"

"I am all right," said Ann, her voice halting. "I only need to...conserve my power...for a while."

"Are you really all right, then? Tell me, what should I do? Call a doctor?"

"No. It has to be...my master."

Her master. Is that person the only one who can fix her?

"Then tell me, where's your master? Colette will take you to meet him."

"I do not know," answered Ann without blinking or turning her gaze away, even as Colette looked like she was about to cry. "More importantly, that doll's target is you. Be careful."

“Y-You may tell me to be careful, but what should I do? Tell my mother?”

“If you do that, your mother will also...become a target.”

Then what am I to do? As Colette finally began sobbing, the doll’s cold hands held Colette’s. They were bloodless, just like the hands that had been tightened around Colette’s neck a short while earlier, but they somehow felt warm.

“I will...protect you. My friend.”

“Protect me,” repeated Colette, sighing.

“To that end, I have reset my objective. Until my master arrives, stay close to me. I will protect you.”

Creaking slightly, Ann stood up.

Colette didn’t know much, but she could tell that her friend was not in tip-top shape. “If that doll comes back,” she began, after a pause.

“It will come again. When it does, I will eliminate it.”

“But what if you lose?”

“I will not lose. Not if my master comes.”

“Is your master looking for you?”

“Without a doubt.” There was no emotion in her flat voice, but she was doing her best to protect her friend, Colette. So Colette wiped the tears from her eyes and made up her mind.

“Then Colette will also do her best.”

Until Ann’s master arrived, Colette would protect her. After all, they were friends.

If rumors about some mysterious doll began to go around, it might be easier for Ann’s master to find her. So Colette let the rumors spread, and no matter how angry it made her mother, she would not let go of Ann. She knew that the other doll would occasionally creep through the mansion, scaring its inhabitants. Its targets, Colette and Ann—even in the poor condition she was in—always managed to chase it away, but the effort left Ann unable to move, falling down in the corridor. Because of this, it was impossible for anyone else in

the mansion to tell which doll was Ann and which was the intruder. If Ann were mistaken for the other doll and thrown away, that would be exactly according to the other doll's plan. Therefore, Colette was firmly opposed to throwing Ann away.

Whenever Ann was unable to turn back into a doll and had to wait outside the mansion, Colette would sneak out of the mansion to play with her in the flower garden. Neither Colette's mother nor the servants of the household were pleased about this, but Colette had fun.

Yes, she had fun. Though she was scared of the other doll, she knew Ann would protect her. But she also knew that these days could not continue for long. Each time the doll came to attack them, Ann grew weaker. While Colette was her primary target, little by little she sapped Ann's strength and grew more powerful.

"If your master comes, can you win?"

At Colette's question, Ann nodded without hesitation. "I can. But there is one problem. I will have to be overhauled."

"Over...what?"

"I will be taken apart and born again. I will also lose my memory. I will forget...you, Colette. My name, Ann, will almost certainly change as well." In a rare occurrence, Ann, who was normally expressionless, frowned heavily. "I am troubled," she sighed. "Troubled. We were supposed to be friends."

Colette was shocked to see Ann show such emotion so plainly on her face. She panicked. "Don't worry, Colette will remember you!"

"But if I forget, will you be able to call me your friend?"

"In that case, we can just become friends again."

Colette couldn't help laughing at Ann's wide-eyed expression of surprise. Ann would forget her; Colette would lose Ann. That should have made her sad, but strangely enough, she found that she was able to smile.

And so, from the bottom of her heart, she wished, "Please, let Ann's master come to take her home."

This wish was granted. The price would be the girl's life.



The scenery changed. The mansion vanished, and their surroundings became one vast flower garden—a flower garden at night. The night sky, which should not have had a single cloud in it, was suddenly cloudy, so that neither the moon nor the stars were visible. In spite of this, the small flowers growing all around them glowed with a faint purple light, so it was possible to survey one's surroundings.

It was a place that closely resembled reality, but it wasn't real. This was a mental image constructed from Colette's memories, a place where her wish could be granted. A location where the Demonic Heirloom would try to swallow her whole, in exchange for granting that wish.

"Damn it!" cried Hat. "Have we been dragged to the other side?! What happened to those girls?!"

"Look, over there! The lighthouse!" Under the lighthouse, which emitted a solitary red light, Colette was making a flower crown. Headed in her direction was Ann—who, for some reason, was missing an arm. In her remaining hand, she held a sharp object that might have been a fork. It glinted in the red light.

Don't tell me she doesn't intend to control Colette, but to kill her?!

Colette was the doll's user, and the owner of this world. If one were to destroy this world—in other words, to register the doll, the tool that had created it—Colette would return to the world of the living. On the other hand, if her life force were to be used up by this tool before that happened, she would die in the real world.

"Octavia, register that doll! If you do that, we can stop—"

"Tee hee hee!" With a shrill laugh, a doll holding a knife appeared beside Octavia and Hat to attack them.

"What?! It can still move in this realm?"

"Hat! My spear!" Octavia evaded the knife thrust at her and aimed a high kick at the doll. It merely laughed again, floating into the air.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” responded Hat loudly. *“System start up. Authentication cleared, summoning ‘Spear.’”*

Hearing Hat, the doll turned slightly, but it was too late. Octavia already gripped a spear in her right hand.

“Glorify Our Majesty’s victory!”

Octavia aimed and hurled her spear at the doll. There was a sound of it striking something hard. The doll, turning back, had stopped the spear with a magical barrier.

Hat was astounded. “Damn it, you’re only supposed to be an imitation! Don’t tell me it’s absorbed the real doll’s power!”

“We’ll deal with this one later, Hat!”

Each moment they fought with this doll, Ann drew one step closer to Colette. Octavia tensed up, preparing to leap to the lighthouse in one bound, but suddenly something had gotten hold of her legs.

Hands were sprouting out of the ground. It was the dead.

Octavia snatched up her spear and severed the wrists of the hands holding her, but one by one, they sprang up out of the earth, ready to devour any living humans they found in their world.

“Hee hee hee!” Its laughter as wild and discordant as ever, the doll looked down at Octavia, who was surrounded by the dead. It spun around in midair.

“So you *are* trying to slow us down! That doll is shrewder than I thought.”

“There are too many of them, Hat! Don’t we have any other weapons—”

“One,” came a man’s voice from above

Octavia turned and looked up at the moonless sky, but there was only darkness overhead.

“Two.”

It was a voice Octavia would never forget. She remembered it so well that sometimes she fancied that she longed to hear it again.

“Three!”

With a roar, a fire broke out around them, raging blue and white. Born of magic, it burned away the dead and the clouds. The doll, too, caught up in the flames, screamed and fell, tumbling through the flower garden.

The moon that had been hidden by the clouds finally showed its face, revealing a silhouette in front of it. It was a man, a cape fluttering behind him, the full moon at his back.

Gasping, Octavia cried, “*You!* Crow, the Phantom Thief!”

“Good evening, Miss Detective.” The Phantom Thief elegantly touched the brim of his top hat in greeting.

“But this time, you weren’t meant to show up!”

“Why, with all that talk of an impostor, I couldn’t just keep quiet.”

“No! I don’t care about that at all!” shouted Octavia. “Come down here! This time, I *will* have you take responsibility for what you did before!”

“I’m pleased to hear that you think of me so fondly, but really, are you in the position to be making demands right now?”

With a start, Octavia returned to her senses.

Hat hurried her along. “Octavia, we need to take care of that doll first! Register it before any more of the dead appear!”

“You!” cried Octavia, sternly pointing her spear at Crow. “Wait here! I’ll be back for *you* later!”

The Phantom Thief only chuckled. “All right. See you in a little while.”

“I mean it! Don’t move! Just wait there!”

Having driven her point home, Octavia turned her back to Crow and ran toward the lighthouse. All the while, the hands of the dead were reaching out of the ground, trying to pull her back.

“Drat! Of all times, why did that Phantom Thief choose to show up now, when we’re so busy?”

“Forget about him. More importantly—” Hat broke off, shouting, “There it is! Register it!”

“I know that! Do you understand me?!”

One of the living corpses was trying to wrap its arms around her, but Octavia sliced it in half diagonally. She turned around then and called to the doll holding the fork, “Automaton! A doll that moves by itself!”

It did not turn around.

Hat and Octavia could clearly see it, which meant they should have been successful. Nevertheless, Hat’s response indicated failure: “*Searching. Error!*”

“But why? That is an automaton, isn’t it? There’s no way that was wrong!”

“Could it be because its power was stolen by the imitation?! Its true nature may have changed.”

“Hee hee hee!” As if to affirm their suspicions, the half-burned doll came to attack them once again from overhead. Octavia tried to knock it away with her spear, but it dodged her blows with ease, laughing all the while. “Are you sure?” it jeered. “Are you sure? Are you sure you want to register her?”

“This damned imitation is mocking us!”

“She’ll forget her friend. Are you sure you want to?”

Octavia frowned. The doll laughed, but then something cut off its laughter and it fled.

Crow took its place, saying, “That one appears to be broken. Are you sure you can’t register it, Miss Detective?”

Octavia raised her eyebrows. She stammered, “I thought I told you not to move!”

“But I just saved you. Besides, I only moved a very short distance.”

“Well, a man like you ought to be kept bound, hand and foot! If I make any exceptions for you, you’ll escape right away!”

Alighting next to Octavia, Crow seemed to ponder this for a moment. “I see. You might have a point. Now, if you’re unable to register that doll, shall I dispose of it?”

“Huh?”

Crow slowly reached out an arm and turned his palm upward. With a popping sound like one might hear in a conjuring trick, a glowing orb appeared. Something revolved inside of it.

A sword, Octavia thought. No. A key?

“Why on earth are you in possession of that?!” Hat gazed at the key in astonishment, but Octavia did not know why. What shocked her was that Crow reacted to what Hat had said.

“That’s because I was *made to use it*. Come out, Magic Sword.”

Still, Octavia could tell that something unusual was happening. With a clink, the key began to turn inside the orb. Then the glowing orb shattered, and a beautiful sword appeared in its place. It shone with such a dazzling light that Octavia reflexively closed her eyes.

“Stop him, Octavia! He can’t use that. That sword has the power to destroy the world, to say nothing of the doll!”

Octavia went to adjust her grip on her spear, then stared at her hand in shock. The spear had vanished.

“Hat, my spear...”

“Damn! Was it no use?! Hey, you there—don’t use that sword! It has the power to erase everything!”

“I’m aware of that,” said Crow. “I’ll adjust its power.” Between the expanding glow of the sword’s magic and his mask, they couldn’t read Crow’s expression, but his voice was as innocent as a child’s. “I look forward to seeing what will become of anything erased here in the real world.”

His eyes, sparkling and full of curiosity, reminded Octavia of someone else’s. She stepped forward, then kicked Crow in the back and sent him tumbling. This caused the magical projectile he’d fired from the tip of his sword to deviate from its intended trajectory toward Colette. Still, the magical projectile gouged out whatever of the world lay in its path; everything it passed through vanished, leaving only a void, as if this world were a painting and only that part had been painted white.

A shiver went up Octavia's spine. She shook off that feeling and shouted at the man, who had fallen face first into a flower bed, "I told you not to move! Hat, let's try again!"

"But we couldn't register the doll as an automaton!" cried Hat.

"I have an idea!"

She'll forget, the imitation—which had drained the original doll's power—had said in warning. That had provided Octavia with a hint. Ann, blown in Colette's direction by the previous blast of magic, was now right beside her. She stood up and brandished her fork.

"It's no use, Octavia! We won't make it in time!"

Another spear appeared in Octavia's hand, but as she was about to throw it, she saw something that made her stop. Hat also stiffened.

The doll had plunged the fork into her own right shoulder. The imitation doll, flying in midair, suddenly let out a scream.

"Ouch! It hurts!"

"Severe error in my recognition system!" Magic crackled around where Ann had plunged the fork into her shoulder.

"You..."

"Requesting a restart. The imitation's contamination will not stop," said Ann haltingly. "I am already sixty...seventy percent infected. If this goes on, I'll kill Colette."

With another crackle, she transformed back from a doll into a human—it was her last act of resistance. It seemed that she couldn't easily maintain either form.

"Are you my master?"

Octavia slowly approached Ann and nodded.

"Is that so? You looked for Colette..." She trailed off. "I would like to specify...one thing. My name..."

"I know."

Because her recognition system had been damaged, the automaton couldn't recognize Octavia. Due to its contamination by the counterfeit doll, it had tried to kill Colette in its place. Therefore, Octavia had to call it by its name.

Her name.

"I didn't have a chance," she sighed. "To thank—" She broke off. "To say goodbye."

Colette had been focused, single-minded, on making flower crowns. Now, she stopped.

Octavia wanted to give them time. She really did want to, but there was no time. Like a bullet, the counterfeit doll came flying in from behind Octavia. Octavia had to stop it.

"Tee hee hee hee!"

"Don't worry, *Ann*."

The doll was headed straight for Colette and Ann. Octavia threw a new spear at it, which seemed at last to tear through its irritating laughter. It skewered the doll and sewed the whole dimension back together.

And then it was destroyed.

"Searching... Target confirmed. Unlock!"

At Hat's clear announcement, the world around them split apart.

When they returned to reality, they were greeted by the night's quiet; there was only the distant clamor of the town square. Octavia picked up Colette, who had collapsed near the window, and returned her to her bed. She pulled the duvet over her and gently laid a hand on her forehead.

Octavia was going to have to manipulate her memory. If anyone found out she had interacted with an Heirloom, it would attract the attention of the inquisitors, and they might even discover Octavia's true identity.

"Hat," she said, "I'll leave it to you." Hat would make sure their stories matched up. This was one of the powers he possessed as the administrator of the tools.

“I guess you’re right. There’s nothing else for it. It’s too difficult to make it as if the doll itself never existed, so all I can do is erase her memories of Ann specifically.”

“Do you think we can fix Ann?”

“Yeah. The next time she wakes up, she’ll be your automaton.”

“Let’s keep on calling her Ann.” That was all Octavia could do.

All right, then, agreed Hat.

Octavia’s hand, pressed against Colette’s forehead, started to glow.

Uncharacteristically, Hat started to grumble. “They only became friends because there was an error in her recognition system. Can you really call that friendship?”

“That isn’t for us to decide.” All at once, the magical glow left Octavia’s fingertips. Octavia and her associates had finished their work here. As she stood back up, Octavia became aware of a commotion outside the window, which had been left open. She heard a familiar voice, and stuck her head out of the window.

“Octavia! Is Miss Colette all right?!” It was Ashton. Constables had crowded around the front door of the mansion.

“Yes. She’s fine. Sorry for running off like that. Have you come to my aid, perhaps?”

“No, the Phantom Thief has shown himself! We saw him flee in the direction of the lighthouse—”

“I forgot!” cried Octavia after a pause. At once, she leapt out of the window and began running up the low hill that led to the lighthouse at full pelt.



Octavia found Crow, the Phantom Thief, immediately. That was because he was sitting gracefully on top of the lighthouse with his long legs crossed. She’d run up the hill as fast as she could, and now she had to stop and catch her breath. Then she shouted, “Hey, you! Didn’t I tell you to stay put?!”

“You may well have said that, but now that we’ve come back from the other

side, I don't see how 'staying put' means much of anything. More importantly, I happen to be wanted by the police, you know."

"Well, that's your own doing! Don't split hairs with me! Just come down here!"

"Octavia, wait. Let me talk to him. You can hear me, can't you?"

Crow had been averting his gaze, playing dumb. Now, hearing Hat's voice, he turned to face them again. Hat, thinking he had obtained confirmation, addressed Crow clearly. "Why do you have that key? That's a key to the vault that holds the Imperial Heirlooms. It's the emergency spare key, right? On top of that, why could you use an Heirloom and remain unharmed? Wait," Hat went on, "in the first place, why could you enter and exit the other side unharmed, just like Octavia?! Octavia is the only successor to the imperial throne left!"

"Hmm. I can't quite hear you."

"All right, Octavia, drag that phantom thief down here! Hurt him enough that we can have a conversation!"

"Leave it to me!" cried Octavia.

"One thousand years have passed since the fall of the United Empire," Crow went on. "The angels haven't *just* been running around, sealing the Imperial Heirlooms away. Merely destroying them would be a waste, wouldn't you say? Since the Heirlooms exist anyway, they'd like to use them. Admittedly, angels sometimes come up with rather human ideas." Crow seemed to smile at Octavia.

Her hands had been reflexively clenched into fists; she relaxed them now. "Just who are you? Could it be that you're associated with the angels? With the royals?"

"If I say anything further, I will reveal my shameful past, which I'd like to keep private. However..." Crow slowly rose to his feet. His cape fluttered in the wind, mingling with the sea spray and flower petals.

Octavia couldn't see the face behind his mask, but his smile, floating in the moonlit night, was both mystical and beautiful.

“If you manage to catch me,” he said, “I won’t mind telling you.”

“Then come down—”

“Incidentally, I’ll take this as payment for saving you this time,” said Crow, producing a doll with a hole in its abdomen.

Blinking, Octavia cried, “Ah, that’s the imitation doll! When did you manage to take that?!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll return it to its rightful owner. Bye for now.” Crow kicked off from the top of the lighthouse, disappearing behind it. In a hurry, Octavia went to the other side of the lighthouse, but she saw nothing but the sea. Naturally, there was no sign of anyone beneath the cliff, either.

Hat muttered bitterly, “He teleported using the key, most likely. We may have a hard time catching him.”

“Oi, Octavia! Did you see Crow, the Phantom Thief?!”

Ashton had come to search the area around the lighthouse. Octavia’s shoulders fell.

“Sorry. He got away.”

“Ah. Then I suppose we can only count on Raven.”

Octavia suddenly looked up and around the area. She couldn’t find Raven among the search party. “Where did Raven go?”

“He said that he might know who’d procured the decoy doll. I sent a few of my men with him.”

“Is that right?” Clenching her fists tightly, Octavia looked out across the sea where Crow had disappeared. There was no one there—only the dark sea, illuminated by the lighthouse.



The man was pacing restlessly around the room. When he saw the shadow come through his window, he stopped.

The shadow belonged to a man wearing a top hat, a black cape, and a mask. At first glance, the man who had been pacing was wary of the visitor; then he

breathed a sigh of relief and approached him.

“O-Oh, how did it go? Did you manage to get the doll back—”

“Good evening.”

At the sound of the visitor’s voice, the man froze. Now, it was hardly as if he could precisely remember the appearance of the one he’d hired. But this voice was clearly different. The young man who had played the part of the Phantom Thief for him had not had such a clear, debonair voice as this.

“I took the liberty of delivering the young impostor to the police.”

Impostor. In other words— The man stared at the large table in the center of the room. He was just beginning to work through the thought.

“Though I think your grudge was unreasonable,” the visitor went on, “you did quite a good job. You put a cursed doll, animated by magic, in the hands of Mrs. Smile’s darling daughter. But if the doll were switched, well—then, no one would suspect you of sending her the cursed doll. You had only to wait for people to say that Miss Colette had been possessed by a demon, and for the scandal to spread. That was your aim, wasn’t it?”

“Who are you?! Are you Crow, the Phantom Thief?” cried the man, but his masked visitor did not answer. He only sat down in the chair across the table and smiled.

“‘It’s only a little prank,’” the masked man mocked. “‘It’s ridiculous to imagine that someone could die from a curse.’ Perhaps that’s what you were thinking? But the doll really did become cursed. It absorbed the power of a Demonic Heirloom that happened to be nearby, and then it was no longer anything to be joked about. That was your miscalculation.”

“Wh-What are you talking about? I’m going to call for help!”

“So you got frightened, and you tried to recover the doll before the inquisitors came. They would be able to track the magic that had been placed on the doll. So in order to dispose of it, you tried to make everyone think that Crow, the Phantom Thief, had made off with it. Isn’t that right? You, too, must have known that it wasn’t a Demonic Heirloom. Even this doll worked hard for you, without any recompense. I feel sorry for it.” After saying all this, the man in the

mask took out the doll.

It was the very doll that the other man had procured. Even though there was a hole in its abdomen and it was burned in many places, he somehow recognized it.

“I’ll return this to you. Oh, don’t worry. This doll is no longer a Demonic Heirloom. What power it had as a counterfeit was all removed by the detective.”

“Detective,” the man pronounced slowly.

“This is nothing but a plain old cursed doll now. You are its owner.”

Without warning, the doll laughed. It was a shrill, piercing laugh. The man’s knees gave way in terror, and he collapsed where he stood.

The masked man stood up.

“Wha...Wha...”

“That being said, although it was temporary, it *did* gain the powers of a Demonic Heirloom. It might be a bit of a nuisance, but please do try your hardest to dispose of it.”

“S-Spare me, Phantom Thief! Crow!” the man cried. He was facing Crow. He tried to stand up, but with the doll cackling at him, he couldn’t. Crawling across the floor now, he reached toward Crow. “I beg of you, if it’s money you want, I’ll give it to you! As much as you want...”

“Money? Trying to impersonate me with no knowledge of my character is what got you into this mess.”

At last, the doll stood up, managing to find its balance on the floor. It creaked as it moved.

“I wonder if you’ll manage to keep your sanity until the police come to arrest you.” Leaving the man alone with these ruthless final words, Crow left the room.

Wait, said the man, trying to cling to Crow.

Then the doll grasped his own leg.

“My...master,” it rasped. “I looked for you!” The doll grinned broadly, and the man let out a scream.

After he’d closed the door to the room behind him, Crow snapped his fingers. That was all it took. His top hat, cape, and mask—everything identifying him as Crow, the Phantom Thief—vanished without a trace.

“Marquis Osvard, I heard someone scream!”

“Ah, it came from this room. I was just about to come and call you. It appears something has happened.”

The constables had been hard at work, without even a chance to catch their breath. After he’d showed them what lay beyond the door, Raven backed away from the situation.

I can leave the rest to the constables, who I’m sure will tidy up the scene in their own way. I saw nothing. When I went ahead of them to hear what the suspect had to say, taking care not to excite him, he was already in this condition—and with that, the case will be closed.

That being said, this case had taken a series of unexpected turns. He’d thought he had simply made a mistake in his work, but then there had come the forged letter of announcement—then, in turn, it’d turned out that the doll had been switched. In the end, at last, he’d found there was an imitation Heirloom. Such a thing made Raven nostalgic.

Perhaps that would be his own fate, as long as he stayed with Octavia. Thanks to her, he could neither conduct himself as a marquis nor as a phantom thief.

Though, well, it was fun, so I don’t really mind.

But he felt that it was about time for him to start acting like a phantom thief and send a letter of announcement himself. After all, she was a detective now. The suspect who had been attacked by the doll and fainted was now frothing at the mouth and flailing wildly, so the constables had to restrain him. Conversely, the doll he had procured was motionless.

When all was said and done, it was only the sort of artifact one could find on the open market. It was a crude imitation, made by a fraud and swindler of a magician. It was only due to its proximity to an Imperial Heirloom that it had

become more powerful. During those few minutes Raven had spent with the man, that power had already faded. From the man's perspective, though, it was certainly still frightening enough.

"He who mischief hatches, mischief catches. I think that's how the saying goes."

Those old-fashioned sayings were difficult to recall. With a sigh, Raven left, leaving the rest to the police.



Octavia sat in the same drawing room she'd been shown to when she had first arrived in the harbor town. A document had been presented to her; she looked at it and blinked.

Prim and composed, Mrs. Smile said, "As promised, I have found you a new job."

"Eh... R-Really?"

"Yes. You did manage to resolve this case without any trouble, after all. Here is a check, as payment for your services."

"Thank you very much!"

"It's only proper. Although it is a pity that the matter of Raven and Colette must be abandoned." Mrs. Smile shot a meaningful glance at Raven.

Raven simply smiled back at her. "I couldn't be happier, now that you understand that I already have Octavia."

"Um, how is Miss Colette?" Octavia blurted out.

In response, Mrs. Smile furrowed her brow. "She is well, but...I'm trying to be careful around her. She must still be in shock. To think that her own uncle would have given her a cursed doll..." Although her tone was bitter, Mrs. Smile must have been feeling shocked herself.

From a close relative—who had worked with the Smile Trading Company for many years as an accountant—it was a terrible betrayal. Since he had worked at the company for so many years, Mrs. Smile's brother had evidently believed that he would be its next president. In spite of this, Mrs. Smile had relinquished

the position to her son. He must have built up feelings of resentment over this. Apparently, up until now, he'd been visiting a litany of small acts of harassment against Mrs. Smile. They had culminated in this commotion with the doll.

"Still, I hear the culprit himself insists that he had no intention of killing anyone."

"I should say not. If he had been able to do anything as reckless as that, then he wouldn't have stopped at simply switching the dolls. Though, hearing how utterly terrified he was, my anger toward him has softened. That Phantom Thief, Crow, is meddlesome, too."

Octavia's expression soured unconsciously, but she said nothing. The cowardly culprit, having spitefully given the so-called "cursed" doll to Mrs. Smile and Colette, had realized that his little prank had spun out of control. Once there was a Demonic Heirloom and a real curse involved, he had become frightened. And so, assuming the name of Crow, the Phantom Thief, he'd tried to retrieve the doll, the evidence of his crime. Ironically, he wound up summoning the real Crow.

In the end, the cursed doll had been returned to him, and he had been scared completely out of his wits.

The doll in question had been left in tatters, having lost its magic. Now, it was nothing more than a doll. But perhaps, at the very moment it had been returned to the culprit, it just might still have been moving.

"He who hatches mischief catches mischief, I suppose." In other words, it looked like he had reaped what he'd sown. One might have considered it a fitting end to the case. All the same, Octavia was extremely displeased by the thought that it was Crow, the Phantom Thief, who had resolved all this.

"One day, I will catch him," she swore.

"Indeed. You have my support, Detective Octavia."

Octavia had only meant to mutter this oath to herself, and she was shocked to hear it affirmed so plainly.

"As to whether or not Demonic Heirlooms really exist, I still have my doubts. But I thought that they might. That's why we need not only the inquisitors, but

detectives like you. Detectives who can conceal things well.” Mrs. Smile snapped her gaudy fan shut and smiled. “Please keep up the good work.”

She’s cheering me on. Overwhelmed with delight, Octavia smiled. “Thank you very much.”

“It’s the least I could do. You saved my daughter, after all.”

“Mother!” With perfect timing, Colette came into the room. Today, she was once again hugging a doll to her chest.

Octavia saw this and narrowed her eyes. *So this hasn’t made her hate dolls, after all. That’s good.*

Colette met Octavia’s eyes and gazed at her in wonder. Then, quickly, she bowed her head. Along with her memories of Ann, she had lost the memory of her conversation with Octavia, too. So Octavia also pretended that they were meeting for the first time and nodded slightly back.

“Mother, are you finished talking?” asked Colette. “Can you play with Colette now?”

“Our guests are still here, are they not? Where are your manners?”

“Perhaps we should consider taking our leave, Octavia,” said Raven. “If not, it’ll be nighttime by the time we get back to the Royal Capital.”

Octavia nodded in response to his thoughtful suggestion. There was no need for them to stay any longer. Mrs. Smile showed them to the mansion’s entrance to see them off, accompanied by Colette.

A girl stood outside, waiting for them; as Octavia walked out the door, the girl turned to face her.

“Lady Octavia.”

“Sorry for the wait, Ann.”

“No, no,” said the girl, bowing her head. “I do not mind waiting.” The automaton had transformed into a human. As an Imperial Heirloom, she was capable of performing her duties in a form indistinguishable from that of a normal human. Since she was already well-known to the town in this guise, Hat had decided that they should let everyone there know that she would be

leaving. After all, if some kindhearted person in the town were to kick up a fuss, thinking Ann had vanished, it would pose a problem for Octavia.

“Well, thank you for your hospitality,” Octavia began. As she turned back to Mrs. Smile to say her final farewell, bowing her head, she saw Colette half hidden behind her mother.

Colette stared unblinkingly at Ann. Clutching tightly at the hem of her mother’s dress, she didn’t say a word. Of course, she could no longer remember Ann—this was to be expected.

Ann gave Colette a quick glance, but she was also expressionless. She had lost her memories of Colette, too. Again, this was to be expected. Octavia had no right to sigh about it. So she simply turned on her heel, prepared to leave things as they were.

But Colette, apparently having found some courage, stepped forward. “Excuse me!” she cried. “Would you like to be my friend?”

“Eh?” Raven blurted out in surprise. He probably didn’t know to whom Colette was referring. Mrs. Smile also looked perplexed.

“Would that be all right, Lady Octavia?” inquired Ann, however, assuming naturally that this referred to her.

Silent, Octavia gave Ann a slight nod.

Ann turned to face Colette again. “If you would be happy to have me as a friend, I would be delighted.”

As if meeting for the first time, but also as if there had always been some sort of bond between them, the two faced each other.

Hat, Octavia called out quietly.

The all-knowing, all-seeing hat replied, “This can sometimes happen.”

“Why, it seems as if I’ve been rejected. She hasn’t given me so much as a glance.” Raven smiled, standing next to Octavia.

She looked at his face in profile for a moment. Pursing her lips, she opened her mouth again. “Ann, Colette, the two of you should exchange addresses. Mrs. Smile, would you kindly lend me a notepad?”

Mrs. Smile had been standing by Colette, looking surprised, but then she said, “Ah, yes. Yes, you’re right,” expressing her agreement again and again until she seemed to come to her senses. She went to fetch the notepad. While they waited, Colette and Ann started to introduce themselves.

“I’m Colette.”

“My name is Ann.”

I think I can leave the rest to them, thought Octavia. Grabbing Raven by the wrist, she dragged him to another corner of the grounds around the mansion, out of view and out of earshot.

“What is it, Octavia? Could it be that you want to comfort me, now that I’ve lost this prospective marriage?”

“Where were you last night?”

Raven blinked at this sudden question. “Where, you say? Just where I told the police I went. After you ran off in pursuit of the doll, I went with some constables to apprehend our prime suspect. Since we were already acquainted, I said I would try to talk to him first, so the constables waited outside while I went into his mansion. However, by the time I found him, the suspect was already in his present state and in no condition to talk to me. Well, since he confessed, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

“Were you really not left alone at any point? Not even on your way to the suspect’s mansion?”

For an instant, Raven’s expression turned serious. Or so Octavia thought—but then he smiled, the corners of his mouth curling up and his eyes narrowing into inverted crescent moons. Before reason returned to Octavia’s mind, she felt her skin crawl.

“Let me see. I took the car to his mansion, so I suppose I *was* alone for that span of time. But I was sure to arrive at the mansion along with the constables, so I could just as well say that I wasn’t alone. After that... Well, directly after I entered the mansion, I guess I was alone. I did have the constables wait outside for a moment. But as soon as I heard the culprit scream, I immediately met up with the constables, so you can hardly say I was left alone.”

Octavia was silent.

“Octavia, it looks like this man really is—” Hat began.

“Why do you ask?” His smile was like a thin sheet of ice, hiding his emotions perfectly. Raven peered unblinkingly at Octavia’s face.

I’d been wary of the man this whole time, even though he hadn’t done anything. I kept wondering why I felt that way. Octavia finally had the answer to her question. She was frightened of him.

This man—still smiling, licking his lips—was apparently enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart.

This is a bad man. Catching a glimpse of Raven’s eyes, Octavia clenched her fists tightly. *I have no doubt that he would deceive me without a second thought. No, he may already have done so. And he would enjoy it.* He was truly an enigma. *What has he done? Why has he done it?* Now that Octavia had considered these questions, she could no longer take her eyes off of him. Now that she was aware of this fear, she could do something about it.

“Could it be that you suspect me of some wrongdoing?”

“No,” Octavia replied. “Not at all.”

Raven blinked, looking almost disappointed. Octavia once again thought to herself that it was unfair of him, acting so childlike, but only whenever she interrogated him like this.

She couldn’t help but find it cute, and that was why she would end up being deceived.

“I don’t suspect you,” she said. “I mean, there’s no evidence.” *And I am a detective.*

“Is that right?” Looking either bored or satisfied by this response, Raven rejoined the conversation. “Then I’m not suspicious.”

“No, you’re not.”

“In that case, you’ll make me your assistant, then?”

“Sure.”

Raven had been sneering, as if to say, *Of course you won't*, but Octavia's curt reply wiped his face clean. He froze.

"Are you serious, Octavia?! This is no joke. I'm dead against it!" cried the all-knowing, all-powerful hat on Octavia's head. He wanted her to know she was making a mistake.

But in order to avoid being sucked in by the eyes that stared back at her, Octavia just smiled. "I'll make you my assistant. If that's what you want, of course." Before he could steal what he wanted from her, she'd give it to him.

Raven scowled, flabbergasted, as if he had been physically slapped. This man who so loved to toy with others apparently did not enjoy being toyed with himself.

Octavia had uncovered one mystery. This feeling of superiority was the best part of being a detective.

"Well, then, shall we head home? I'll leave the driving to you," said Octavia to Raven, slapping him on the back to urge him along. She would leave the driving to Raven, but how would she decide their next destination as they moved forward? Everything rested on Detective Octavia's shoulders.

EPISODE 2.5

Lately, I have really enjoyed the feeling of her eyes fixed upon me. Those eyes—which proclaim that from now on, she will be observing me closely, so as not to miss a single action I take—are a source of great enjoyment for me. Even after I gave her some of her favorite biscuits from that bakery she loves, she just kept on staring, which really was something.

“Is there something stuck to my face?”

“No,” she said after a pause.

It’s cute, that frustrated expression she makes whenever—in spite of all her dedication—she can’t find anything suspect.. She must have been thinking, *I’ll be ready the very moment he does or says anything suspicious*. But I don’t intend to indulge her as far as that.

I chuckled internally, then returned to my work sorting the mail like a good assistant. The drawing room we were using in place of an office was silent. Ever since Octavia had begun to suspect me, even her partner Hat seemed to have decided to keep quiet, so it truly was silent.

Octavia had also begun to choose her words carefully. I was feeling somewhat discontented by this, naturally. I was unable to enjoy a typical conversation with her now, and it was like an unopened toy chest; one never knew what might come out.

Still, in place of that was a surfeit of enjoyable silence. Nor was I bothered by the wary eyes of the girl she had brought back from the harbor town.

I said, “Thanks to an introduction from Mrs. Smile, we have a job offer.”

“What is it?”

“To search for a runaway. The young master of a certain household seems to have acquired an undesirable pastime and hasn’t come back home. No wonder I haven’t seen him recently.”

“Do you know him?”

“I suppose, if by ‘know him’ you mean know his name and face. I sighted him once at a soirée. I have some idea of where he might have gone. He definitely had a bar that he liked to go to. I’d say there’s a high probability that he’s there. I guess the parents don’t know about it.”

“If you’ve already solved this case, what am I supposed to do?” said Octavia, sulking.

“This time was just a coincidence. But it’s a special kind of bar. I’m pretty sure that it opens at very particular times.”

“Huh. Do you know when?”

“Um... I’m pretty sure it was only open between eleven and twelve o’clock at night, on the third Wednesday of the month.” Having said this, I realized something with a start. Octavia, sitting on the sofa opposite me, met my gaze. She had realized the same thing. That would be the same date that Crow, the Phantom Thief, had specified in his latest announcement.

We stared at each other in silence. As if testing each other, seeing who would make the first move.

“What do you want to do?” I decided to take the lead for now.

“What do you think we should do?”

Even posed with such a dilemma, as the Phantom Thief, I could hardly withdraw an announcement. It would inconvenience the police, who had strengthened their security preparations in response to my letter.

My prey’s whereabouts was the street of luxury residences where the mansions of nobles and capitalists were densely concentrated, even for the Royal Capital. It was a substantial distance away from any dubious bars. And my prey was said to be a rose that would not wilt. At present, it seemed the gardens and vineyards managed by the estate’s owner were in full bloom in spite of the season, and the grape harvest had been fruitful. This capitalist had made an immense profit from the sale of the wine made from these grapes, but there were reports that the workers in the gardens and vineyards had been seen staggering around as if sleepwalking. Without a doubt, a Demonic

Heirloom was involved.

Octavia had doubtless come to the same conclusion.

In other words, she had to prioritize Crow's announcement. I made every effort to transmit that thought to her with a slight smile. *You'll prioritize the Phantom Thief—prioritize me—won't you?* Such was the message I tried to convey, like a pestering lover. I'm sure she received it. Even if not, considering her duty, it was obvious which of the two options she would choose.

In spite of this, she was staring me down, as if waiting for me to make a move. "Would you like me to prioritize Crow the Phantom Thief?"

I suppressed the reflex to ask, *Why are you asking me that?*

"I wonder," I mused instead. "It looks like either job will come with a reward. The amount would be greater if we went with Crow, though."

"But if we consider the effort involved, looking for a young man who ran away from home would have a better benefit-to-cost ratio." This detective had a surprisingly strong sense for economic concerns.

I shot back, "If you catch the Phantom Thief, you might become an overnight celebrity."

"On the other hand, taking a job from an aristocrat will lead to further job offers. Besides, thinking of our success rate, won't focusing entirely on Crow call my abilities as a detective into question?"

She also seemed to have an excellent sense for risk management.

"It sounds like you want me to prioritize Crow." She also had enough acting talent to say this with a straight face.

"No, it isn't that. But if you're worried about losing to him, and you want to give him a miss this time, I won't try to stop you."

However, she couldn't keep calm when it came to Crow, the Phantom Thief.

"I didn't say that."

"That's how it sounded to me."

"What about you? Which job do you think we should accept? As an assistant."

So it's come to this. I grinned, all the while thinking that she was also quite the skilled negotiator. "I don't mind which. You're the detective, so do as you please."

Octavia's expression soured, the corners of her mouth turning down. Just getting to see that gave me a feeling of satisfaction. *What a cheap assistant to hire I am. I'm surprised at myself.* But there was no escaping the truth. More than any jewels or paintings, it was Octavia who continued to steal my attention.

See there—as I blinked, she sighed somberly, uncrossing and crossing those gorgeous legs again. There was a refinement and arrogance in her demeanor that I truly found beautiful.

"All right. We'll turn down the commission to find the runaway young man. However, include all the details you have about the bar—and anything else you know—along with our letter of refusal."

"You're giving them free service?"

"We're refusing their kind offer of work. Besides, it came through Mrs. Smile. Really, that Phantom Thief is nothing but a thorn in my side..."

Hearing her say that so hatefully, I couldn't help but laugh. She glared back at me, but I couldn't bring myself to apologize. Instead, I offered her a better plan.

"What if we split up, and I go to that bar by myself? If I'm only confirming whether or not the runaway is there, I should be able to manage. I know his face, after all."

"Huh? As my assistant, you have to stay by my side." Octavia's expression was so disgruntled that my hands froze in the middle of my work.

If she let me excuse myself from the scene of the burglary, she might miss her chance to grasp the true identity of Crow, the Phantom Thief. That was probably the judgment she had made, but the way she put it was most unfair. It was as if she had said, *You need to be with me so I can catch you.*

If I'm stuck working alongside her, hasn't she caught me already? Coming to this sudden realization, I thought I might choke. *But no, it hasn't yet come to that. I haven't conceded as far as that yet.*

“Perhaps if the matter of the Phantom Thief is easily wrapped up, or if he flees in the direction of the bar, we may just be able to fit it in.”

Without even knowing of the conflict in my heart, the detective had made such a convenient request of me. The way her eyes interrogated me was so unfair and yet so cute. It frustrated me to find them so adorable. *Very well*, I said, nodding plainly.

Then, when the time came, I fled in the opposite direction from the bar.

EPISODE 3

With a sword in her right hand and a gun in her left, she cut down the undead in front of her and beat a path forward. However, the moment she opened that path, the world began to warp. The narrow path through the wheat field became a cobblestone street, and the distant trees that ran alongside it became gas street lamps. The shacks in the distance, one by one, became buildings built from bricks. This was a phenomenon that could not happen in the world of the living.

Clicking her tongue in irritation, Octavia surveyed her surroundings. They had already changed completely from the calm countryside to the streets of a city. The paints, which had already absorbed a number of people and gained some strength, continued to change the scenery as if repainting it, concealing its user.

“Blast! There’s no end to this, Octavia! We need to find the painter, the one using it...”

“I know! I know he’s somewhere. Somewhere that hasn’t changed—”

“One.”

A shadow soared through the sky of this world, where everything was a mere imitation. Panicked, Octavia looked up at the sky.

“Two!”

“Phantom Thief! Crow! Why are you turning up again?! I’m busy!”

“Three!”

With a snap of his fingers, Crow summoned a roaring flame. It raged through the hordes of the dead and the city street scene that surrounded Octavia, as if burning the painting away.

“This building is the only place that hasn’t changed. Therefore, he must have fled inside.” Alighting upon the roof of the building, today—as ever—the Phantom Thief smiled. Octavia wanted to put a bullet in that calm face of his.

In the remains of the building after it was blown open, though, she spotted a man painting obsessively. The walls around him were covered in canvases.

“That’s him, Octavia! As for that Phantom Thief—”

“We’ll deal with him later, right? I know! Let’s go, Hat! You are a *Palette of Paints!*”

She’d learned that there was no point in telling the Phantom Thief to wait for her, so there was nothing else for it but to escape this world and catch him back in reality.

“*Searching... Target confirmed! Unlock!*” As Hat cried out in confirmation, the palette the painter was holding began to spout out the paints it held.

Red, blue, yellow—various colors blended in midair, forming a single black geyser that descended on Octavia. This was the signal that everything here would be painted over, and they would return to the real world. But Octavia couldn’t afford to lose consciousness now.

I’m pretty sure I was in a grand hall with paintings on display!

Octavia opened her eyes. Just as she had imagined, she was back where she had been before she had gotten sucked into the other side. A grand hall in a palace, decorated with paintings that were judged to have been cursed.

“Oi, Octavia! Are you all right?!” It was a familiar face. Inspector Ashton Baker, who had been reassigned to the Royal Capital, put an arm around Octavia’s shoulders. Octavia nodded and looked around the hall.

“I’m fine. More importantly, what about Crow, the Phantom Thief?!”

“Not a clue. All of a sudden, the lights went out—”

“Inspector Baker, this painting has been replaced!”

Along with Ashton, Octavia turned to face the largest painting in front of them. The painting, which up until moments ago had definitely depicted a family at their dining table, was now a painting of a pig’s backside. And in the center of the painting, a card had been affixed.

I’ve helped myself to the Demonic Heirloom.

From Crow, the Phantom Thief

With a deafening crash, all the window panes shattered. A shadow appeared in front of the large window at the far end of the hall. With one foot on the window frame, the figure was indeed carrying a large painting under one arm.

“Why, you...!”

“The paints are safe with us, Octavia,” said Hat. “Calm down.”

Thus scolded by Hat, Octavia stopped where she stood. “But we can’t just forget about a piece that was painted with them—”

“Let’s do this again sometime, Miss Detective.” Crow casually blew her a kiss.

Octavia arched her back, ready to pounce. Before she could, the Phantom Thief departed with his cape fluttering behind him.

“Bugger. So the rumors were true—that painting was a Demonic Heirloom. I’ve seen more than my share of them lately, I have!”

“Ashton, where is my assistant, Raven?!”

“R-Right.” Ashton blinked at Octavia as she turned suddenly to face him. “He was here until we came into this room—” He broke off. “Oi, Octavia! Aren’t you going after the Phantom Thief?!”

“Sorry! I’ll be right back!”

In any event, she had no choice but to leave the rest here to the police. She had retrieved the palette of paints. She was concerned about what might result from a painting painted with the Heirloom, but if she captured Crow, that matter too would be closed.

“Where are you planning to look, Octavia?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, but if we can find Raven quickly enough, there might still be time.”

“Ah, Octavia! I’m glad to see you’re all right!”

Bursting out of the hall and into a corridor, she found the very man she’d been looking for at once. As she stood there, stunned, Octavia’s assistant walked up to her and breathed a sigh of relief.

“That was quite the surprise. After that hullabaloo in the great hall, everyone ran out through this corridor and pushed me out with them.”

“Is that right?” Octavia asked slowly.

“I hurried back as fast as I could, but what’s the situation now?” The Raven who looked back at Octavia—concerned now, of course—wore neither a top hat or a cape, nor was he holding the stolen painting. There was not a shred of evidence to be found.

That was right. She had no evidence that this man was Crow, the Phantom Thief, the man whose legs she had sworn to break before tearing off that infuriating mask. Not a shred of evidence.

“Did you manage to catch Crow, the Phantom Thief?” asked the man with a brazen smile on his face, seeming livelier than ever. Octavia congratulated herself for being disciplined enough not to hit him.



“I’ve started to feel like maybe Raven isn’t the Phantom Thief.”

“Isn’t it a little late to be having doubts?”

Although she’d tried to refuse, Raven had taken Octavia home. The moment she’d gotten inside, she had thrown herself down on the sofa, feeling a bit exhausted.

“I mean, there’s no evidence. It’s just a hunch.”

“Well, that might just be because he’s been more careful lately not to leave any. In the first place, we shouldn’t have let him know that we were onto him. Lately, even I’ve been careful not to say anything in front of him that might give us away!”

“Even so, isn’t it frustrating to go on being deceived by him?”

“You need to learn some strategy, you good-for-nothing.”

“You’re all-knowing and all-powerful, Hat. Can’t you think of something?”

Octavia’s protest was so flattering that Hat stood up straight, but then he drooped down to one side again. “But, well, for some reason, he has the key...”

“But what is that key? Now that you mention it, you still haven’t explained that to me.”

“It needs no explanation. A key’s a key. It unlocks the vault—and with it, the ability to administer the Imperial Heirlooms.”

Octavia sat up silently while Hat bounced away to rest on the low cabriole leg table in front of her.

“As you well know, the Imperial Heirlooms were cursed by our god when the United Empire collapsed and they lost their leader. They left my administration, and I lost all the information on my register. Their storage and usage could no longer be controlled, and if activated in that condition, they would degrade into the perilous tools known as Demonic Heirlooms.”

“So that’s why I’m helping you to re-register them now?”

“Only a magic user of the imperial bloodline can do the work of registering them—which leaves only you, now. But every rule has its exceptions. In this case, the exception is that key. The key performs the function of activating the Imperial Heirlooms in an emergency. Though it only works temporarily, it allows someone not of your bloodline to use an Heirloom correctly, just as you do. Even if the tool is not yet registered.”

“Why would he have something like that...?”

“Who knows? I was sure that the angels would have destroyed something as dangerous as that long ago...”

With a long sigh, Octavia threw herself down on the couch again. The cushion gently accepted her face with a squish.

“Just who is he?”

“How about you ask Eliza? At the very least, she should know something about the line of the Marquis Osvard.”

She groaned. “I don’t really want to...”

“Why not?”

Why indeed? She wanted to expose the secret behind that grin of his, but part of her wanted to leave it alone, if he had some reason to hide it. Nobody likes

for people to rummage around in their private matters against their wishes.
This isn't like me. I want to ask him myself, but how?

For some reason, when it came to Raven, she always seemed to lose her bearings.

“Hey. Don’t sleep there, Octavia. Change properly and go to bed. Octavia?”

“I wish I had a chair that could carry me to bed. No, even better—a bed that could fly anywhere.”

“Don’t be lazy! Getting up now will be a good example to the other tools—”

All at once, the cushion was pulled out from under Octavia’s face. Octavia leapt up reflexively, but then saw the girl who had taken her cushion, standing beside her with her hands on her hips.

“Ann. You gave me a start.”

“I intended to. It woke you up, did it not? No matter how tired you might be from your work, I struggle to think that your attitude befits a queen.”

As Ann told her off fluently and without an expression on her face, Octavia sighed.



After she had been registered and repaired by Hat, Ann the doll automaton still lacked a great deal of expression, but she had started to talk more and now worked around the house. Also, she was strict with Octavia. Though she had had no choice, Octavia quietly thought that this might be her revenge against Octavia for erasing her memories of her friend. That being said, she and Colette were now pen pals.

“It is that attitude of yours that allows Marquis Osvard to take advantage of you.”

“Wait. What are you talking about?”

“Today, once again, we received refreshments from him before work. He said you would probably be tired after work.”

Was he so far-seeing? Or was he simply confident that he wouldn’t be caught? Just the thought of that playful smile, surfacing at the back of her mind, robbed her of the will to resist Ann’s instructions.

“All right, all right. I’ll go to bed properly, after changing.”

“Very good. But first, please glance over this.” Ann briskly handed a letter and paper knife to Octavia. Hat hopped onto Octavia’s head as she read the name of the letter’s sender.

“What, another letter from home? Do they expect a reply? Do they have so much time on their hands?”

“I wonder. It looks like it’s from Jessie.” Octavia wanted to put off reading it, but with Ann glaring at her, she broke the seal with the paper knife and removed the envelope’s contents. Then she frowned. This was not a typical letter from home. Something else was inside.

“A summons...from the royal family of Angelus?!”

“What have those rotters been up to?”

Seeing a need for us to properly discuss our grandmother’s inheritance, we made a request of His Highness, the queen’s brother, who has always been fond of Edward. Once we did, we were lucky enough to receive an audience! Her

Majesty the Queen will be there as well.

So let us meet in the Royal Capital.

“Don’t tell me they’re planning to take this mansion from us,” muttered Octavia in a daze. Her sister’s adorable handwriting seemed almost to dance with excitement on the page.

Wherever they looked out the window of their horse-drawn coach, the wheels rolling underneath them, the streets of the Royal Capital were orderly. Its overall construction was circular, with castle walls around it. The bowl-like arc of the Nouer flowed directly through its center, forming a boundary between the northern and southern halves of the city. On the far side of the river’s bridges was the crescent-shaped northern half, where the luxury residences of nobles and royals were concentrated. The fan-shaped southern half was lined with such institutions as banks and schools, along with the homes of the middle and working classes.

As for the royal castle itself, it could be found in the very center, floating in the sky above the Nouer River. Several bridges, large and small, connected the northern and southern halves of the city. As the coach approached a bridge on the eastern side, Octavia narrowed her eyes.

Today was a clear, balmy day, with not a cloud in the sky. The flying castle, usually only dimly visible in the distance, could now be seen clear as day. Since the fall of the United Empire, this was the only castle allowed to reside in the sky, this close to the heavens. It was inhabited by the royal family—the angels and their descendants, a winged race.

“I wonder what makes it float,” said Raven. He sat across from Octavia in the coach, looking in the same direction.

Octavia had heard that, long ago, the castle had been known as the Imperial Castle. Her ancestors had chosen to restore the tools that their god had cursed after they’d struck him down, and they had entrusted the palace to the angels, who had resolved to rebuild the kingdom. To the royal family of Angelus, in other words. But today, Octavia did not think of this castle as her home. Instead, she thought of it as a prison in the sky, used to lock up members of her

family.

Perhaps it was because of that sense of connection to her family, but Octavia wished to avoid talking about the castle. She changed the subject.

“Sorry you ended up having to come along.”

“Of course I’d come with you. I’m your assistant.”

After a pause, she said, “Right. So you are.” *Though I still think you might be the Phantom Thief.* Octavia looked at Raven, suspicious, but he only grinned back at her. His expression seemed to say, *If you have something you say, go right ahead,* which left Octavia uninterested in saying anything at all.

To be safe, I did contact Eliza, but...I don’t know how this might turn out. Although the royal castle itself floated in the sky, the palace—where those that had been granted an audience were received—was on the ground. The coach crossed the bridge before turning onto the main street on the northern side. They passed by a plaza with a fountain, then came to a stop in front of the stairs leading up to a palace that, with its high steeples, looked very much like a cathedral.

A tail-coated servant appeared, guiding them inside. He did not have wings; he was human.

Angels preferred to be in the sky. Octavia had heard it said they believed that if forced to walk upon the ground, they would be no different than the wingless humans. Which meant that this earth-bound palace, used for audiences with the royals, was likely managed by humans.

Before the servant could even ask them what their business was, Raven had explained everything. He was a man who could thoroughly anticipate other people’s questions. This wasn’t an area in which Octavia was especially skilled, so she decided to leave the talking to him.

I suppose he is my assistant, after all.

After they had climbed to the top of a wide staircase, which seemed about two stories high, a great hall stretched out before their eyes. There was no sign that anyone was there, and it was silent. Perhaps it was only the limestone statue of an angel in the center of the hall, but there was an air of serenity

throughout the room that made it feel more like a temple than a palace.

“Octavia, this is a rare chance. Use the parallel ruler and sketch out a plan of the palace,” said Hat, who today had taken the form of a small hat, the sort befitting the daughter of a noble house.

“Here is the waiting room,” said the servant guiding them.

Her eyes trained on Raven’s back as she followed, Octavia quietly answered Hat. “Won’t someone notice?”

“The angels cannot use our tools, and they cannot trace the tools’ magic, either. If they were going to notice something, it would be the man in front of us, who might be the Phantom Thief. If some alarm does go off, just look confident and counter by asking what’s the matter. You can draw the floor plan itself on the notepad in the mansion.”

I see, Octavia thought. *That might be fun*. Her voice so soft the words could have been mistaken for a sigh, Octavia summoned the parallel ruler. It appeared in the palm of her hand for only a moment before vanishing, as if it were aware of its surroundings.

“It’s big, isn’t it?” Raven said, turning around, just as Octavia breathed a sigh of relief.

Here we go again, she thought with a smile. “Why’d you turn around all of a sudden?”

“I had a feeling that you really wanted me to.”

Octavia asked slowly, “Why would you think that?”

“You seemed lonely, with only my back to look at. Ah, yes—your face looks exactly how I thought it would. How amusing.”

“I was only thinking, ‘What is this fool saying?’ And it’s rude to call my face ‘amusing.’”

“You’re cute,” sighed Raven. “And your face is all the more marvelous. Thank you for that.” Laughing, he turned to look ahead again.

For some reason, a feeling of defeat spread through Octavia’s chest. “I have no idea what you’re so happy about.”

“Just happy to get a reaction out of you, I guess. After all, you possess such an expansive heart—almost like Her Majesty the Queen.”

Octavia frowned, panicking. This was the palace where the queen resided, and Raven was a noble.

The servant who was guiding them turned back and glared at Raven. “Show some respect.”

“Oh, that’s right. Please, think of that as merely the babbling of a fool in love.” If he meant to convince the servant of his earnestness, there was no contrition in his words. Quite the contrary—he almost sounded like he was taunting the man.

He’s the sort of person who might pick a fight with an angel just for the fun of it, thought Octavia, beginning to feel worried. “Don’t try anything,” she warned. “You’re my assistant, so you should be attending to me.” Octavia frowned as Raven turned around with a look of surprise. “Why do you look as if you’d forgotten that?”

“No, you’re right. Yes, I’ll be careful.”

“Really?” Octavia pressed the matter, unconvinced by Raven’s response. He only said, “Yes,” again, nodding like a child. “I won’t misbehave. I’m not a child, you know.”

“Octavia, my darling sister!”

Octavia turned to face the source of the voice that came flying in from behind. It was her half sister, running down the corridor to greet her, her long hair swaying behind her.

Octavia had not seen her in quite some time. “Jessie.”

“Oh, how wonderful to be able to see you again! I was so worried about you!”

“So worried that you decided to reach out to her with a summons from the Queen of Angelus?” said Hat.

He had made a good point, but Octavia could not bring herself to feel too angry with her half sister, who fawned over her now, clinging to her arm. In person, Jessie’s attitude was plainer than it had been in her letter, enough that

Octavia couldn't help but be taken aback.

"What will you do, Octavia? You're up against Her Majesty the Queen. Father was upset, and Prince Edward was also worked up, saying that the matter must be straightened out," she sighed. "Prince Edward also has His Highness, the queen's brother, as his ally. Try as I might, I couldn't defend my sister..."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, it is! But if I were to speak on your behalf, Father and Prince Edward just might decide to withdraw before we meet with His Highness."

"You might be right."

"Of course I am! So, my dear sister, won't you at least tell me the whole story? Where is our grandmother's inheritance?"

"Don't worry. There's nothing for you to worry about."

Jessie watched Octavia. For just a moment, her gaze—which had been uneasy—turned perilous. But she quickly clasped both hands in front of her chest, bowed her head, and looked up at Octavia. "But, sister..."

"I'll be fine."

"Um..."

"I'm fine."

"But," protested Jessie.

"I'm *fine*."

Jessie was silent.

"I...am...fine."

Sounding the words out one by one seemed to communicate to Jessie that Octavia did not wish to continue their conversation any further.

Suddenly, Jessie's expression turned to one of appraisal. She was, as ever, a docile girl of meager endurance. "Are you quite sure you wish to maintain that attitude? You're sure you won't regret it? Edward is a prince, and His Highness is Her Majesty's younger brother. Her Majesty the Queen will herself be my mother-in-law one day!"

“Congratulations.”

Jessie received Octavia’s heartfelt blessing with a vacant expression. Then she turned bright red.

“Why, I never! You’ll regret this! Even if you apologize afterwards, I won’t forgive you—” Jessie looked like she was about to turn and storm off, but then she froze. She took a step back. For the first time, she was aware of Raven, who was standing behind Octavia. Her eyes widened, and she began to fidget as if in a panic.

Seeing this, Hat snorted. “I suppose he does have a nice face, at least. His status is also desirable. If he knew to what extent, he’d never shut up.”

Raven did certainly seem to possess all the qualities that Jessie might find attractive. Moreover, Octavia realized, Raven—frivolous as he was—would probably fancy a girl like Jessie, too.

At that moment, a gloomy feeling suddenly came over Octavia. She was surprised at herself. *Hmm?*

While Octavia stood perplexed, Jessie addressed Raven, her cheeks flushed. “I beg your pardon for subjecting you to such an unsightly scene—I am Jessie de Reine. And, er, who might you be?”

“He’s my assistant.” Without delay, Octavia stepped in between the two of them, blocking off Raven behind her back.

Jessie scowled. “I wasn’t speaking to you, sister. Erm...”

“Octavia.”

Octavia thought Raven had called her name more politely than usual. That’s what she thought, at least, until he grabbed her by her shoulder and pulled her back. She looked up in irritation, right into Raven’s grinning face.

His was a shining smile that seemed to contain a sweet venom.

“Let’s go into the waiting room.” Then, practically dragging Octavia behind him, Raven opened the door the servant was standing by.

“Ah,” gasped Jessie. “Wai—”

For the briefest moment, Octavia thought she had seen Raven shoot Jessie a disparaging glance. Before she could be sure, he closed the door behind them. What she did know, without needing any confirmation, was that he had shut Jessie out. In short, he had ignored her.

At Octavia's suspicious look, Raven inclined his head meaningfully. "I haven't done anything bad."

But judging from his expression, he was clearly enjoying himself. He was probably aware that he had hurt Jessie's pride.

"Well, I'm just glad they were separated before any complications could spring up," said Hat.

"I suppose so," Octavia agreed. She nodded in resignation. Perhaps it was only the shock of their sudden departure, but the gloomy feeling in her chest from earlier had cleared.

"What a cute sister you have." Once again, Raven's words stirred up those complicated feelings in Octavia.

Smack dab in the middle of the room, there was a table with cabriole legs, surrounded by sofas. Raven sat down on one.

"You—" Octavia broke off. "Do you understand the gravity of the situation you're in? Jessie—she's, well...very good at telling on others."

"That's not a compliment, Octavia," muttered Hat.

"I'm a marquis. Ignoring an earl's rude daughter won't cause any problems for me." Raven spoke calmly, pouring water into one of the glasses that had been prepared for them.

Octavia sat on the seat opposite Raven and admonished him. "Jessie is Edward's fiancée. That reasoning won't necessarily wash."

"Ah, that's right. Now that you mention it, I suppose she is. So there's a prince involved as well. Curses! Why, I should have dressed up a little more for today."

"Huh?" Octavia looked Raven up and down, surveying his outfit. His high-quality, well-tailored jacket—with only one lapel embroidered—clearly showed off his sense of fashion. It was a smart outfit, with obvious attention paid to the

color of the tie, waistcoat, and even cuffs. And with the silky hair that framed his face, and his long lashes...

Even nibbling on a biscuit, he managed to look beautiful.

Octavia was the one with sartorial problems. After all, Ann was always complaining, telling her to straighten out her dress.

"Is what you have on lacking in some way?" Octavia asked.

"I've only seen him once, at a soiree, from a distance, but I'm the shorter one out of the two of us. He has a better physique, too."

After a pause, she said, "I think you're right, but what of it?"

"I need to make an effort." The sentiment was commendable, but Octavia didn't sense any urgency from Raven. Quite the contrary, as he licked off a biscuit crumb that was stuck to his finger. The faint smile that appeared on his face was an expression of overwhelming dominance.

"With that attitude," said Octavia, "you look more like an evil emperor than a con man." She rubbed her arms, where goosebumps had stood up.

Raven smiled in delight. "Oh, but I'm your assistant, remember?"

Octavia was starting to feel like her greatest challenge wouldn't be her relatives or His Highness, the queen's brother, but rather keeping Raven under control. Octavia was beginning to nurse a headache when a knock finally came upon the door. A voice from behind the door informed them that the preparations for their audience were complete, and they rose to their feet.

They were shown to a chamber that looked more like a meeting room than a space for an audience. Underneath a chandelier was a large, round table, which encircled the area over which the chandelier hung. In the part of the room farthest back from the entrance was a seat upon a dais, surrounded by a gauze curtain. It was the queen's seat, which overlooked the round table. But there was no sign of the queen herself.

As Octavia and Raven were directed to sit on the left side of the round table by their guide, a voice came from behind.

"Marquis Osvard."

The voice was familiar to Octavia, although she had never heard it say that name before. She turned around to look at the speaker. It was Edward. It had been three months since she had last seen him, and his hair, which had been cropped short before, had grown a little longer. But why had he called out to Raven? Had he called the wrong person? Before Octavia could seek confirmation, Raven moved.

“It is an honor to be spoken to by you, Your Highness, Prince Edward.” Raven placed a hand on his chest and bowed gracefully. At the moment, the person with the highest status in this room was Edward.

Raven’s deference made perfect sense, but Octavia was still shocked, to be honest. *So he does have some common sense.* He was capable of acting like a proper noble, after all. She’d forgotten he even could, since recently all she had seen him do was stick his nose into other people’s business in the name of “fun.”

Raven’s head was still bowed. With a calm expression, Edward said, “Let’s dispense with the formalities.”

This, too, was a normal step in proceedings. Jessie was clinging to Edward from behind; each time Octavia’s eyes met her sister’s, Jessie smiled triumphantly. Failing to understand why, Octavia looked back in puzzlement.

“And what might you be doing here?” asked Edward. “Did Octavia make some request of you?”

“No, Your Highness. Right now, I am helping her—I’m her assistant.”

“Assistant?”

“Yes. I couldn’t help but be charmed by her skills as a detective.” In stark contrast to Edward, whose face was full of suspicion, Raven maintained a serene smile.

After a moment, Edward said, “I’ve heard the rumors about you. That you’re exceptionally skilled, and you manage your estates superbly.”

“Thank you very much.”

“You must have assets, too. Surely there’s no need for you to act like a

common laborer. In spite of that... Well, if you're obligated to her in any way, I'll hear you out. Octavia is a selfish woman, after all. Indulging her would be folly."

For just a moment, Raven clammed up. But before Octavia turned to look at him again, he was smiling again.

"Incidentally, please excuse my rudeness from earlier, Jessie."

Jessie blinked in surprise at hearing her name spoken so suddenly. Raven's demeanor toward her was quite different from earlier. Now, he smiled sweetly and bowed to her.

"I am still young and inexperienced, you see, and do not yet fully understand what behavior is appropriate for a nobleman in a private setting. Just now, a captivating young lady suddenly appeared in front of me—naturally I was nervous, and I couldn't manage even the simplest of greetings to my own satisfaction," sighed Raven. "Were your feelings hurt in any way?"

"Well... No, not at all. I also find such encounters...difficult." Jessie emerged from behind Edward, her cheeks a deep shade of crimson.

Edward was clearly annoyed by this exchange, but neither Raven nor Jessie gave him so much as a glance.

"I hope you haven't come to dislike me already," said Raven, inclining his head mischievously.

Jessie shook her head hurriedly. "Of course not. Please, let us get along well."

"I'm glad, though it would appear to be about time for our audience." Raven added, almost whispering, "Let's continue this later." Those last words sounded rather intimate.

Jessie turned bright red.

Edward stepped forward to hide her behind him, speaking roughly. "Why, you! Jessie is my fiancée!"

"I'm well aware of that. And what of it?"

"What, you say! You were flirting with her just now, weren't you?! Don't tell me that you got closer to Octavia in order to get closer to Jessie—"

“I don’t think a mere greeting warrants such an overreaction. It’s not as if you’re a virgin yourself.”

For a moment, silence completely dominated the room. Octavia too was at a loss for words. She had never heard an insult like this before.

“Excuse me,” said Raven. “Only a slip of a tongue. Let’s go, Octavia.”

Leaving Jessie and the flabbergasted Edward with a snicker, Raven turned on his heel. Octavia hurried after Raven.

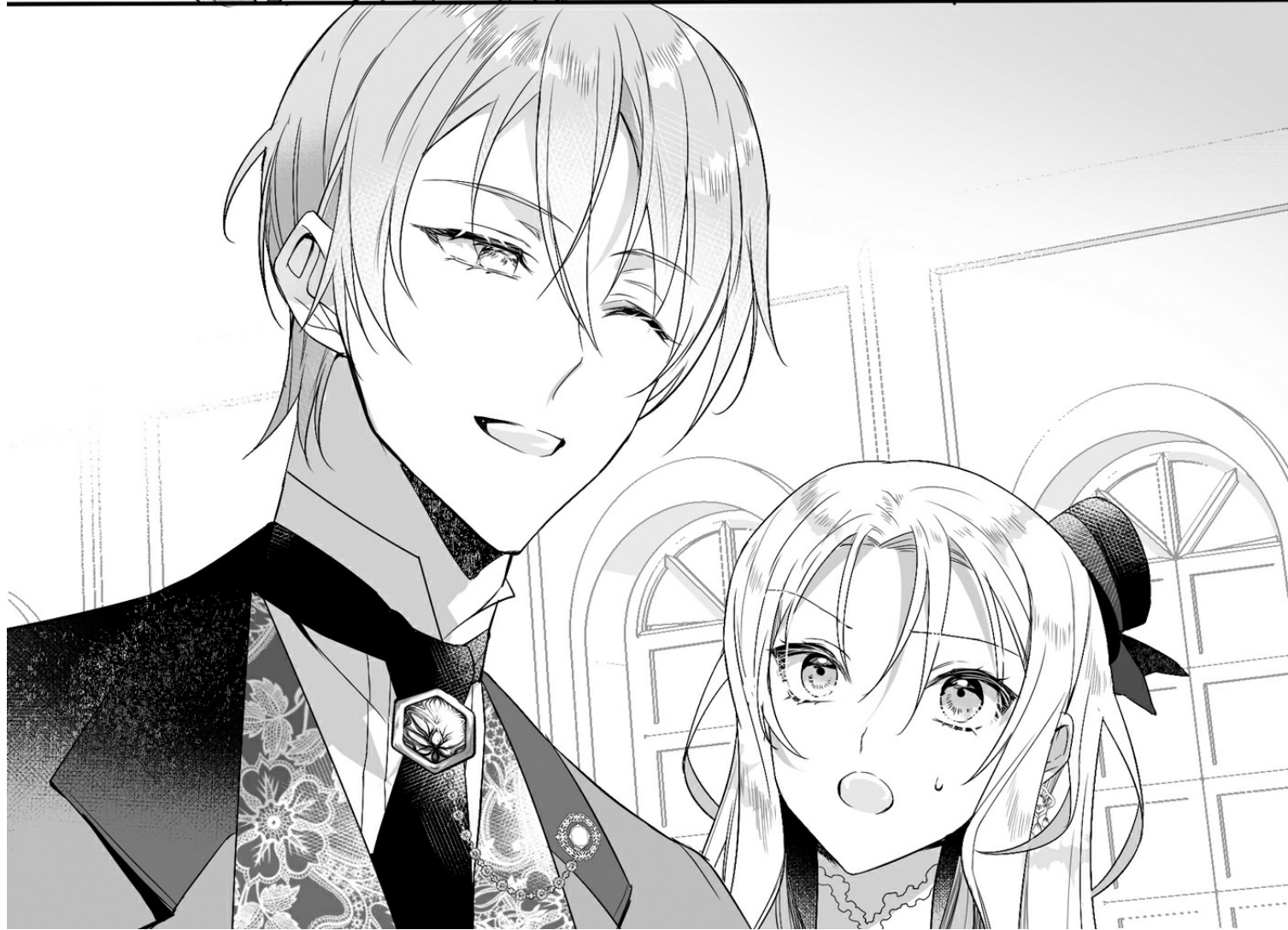
“Raven,” she cautioned, “what you said just now—that was really going a bit too far!”

“Don’t worry. Your sister is very kind. I’m sure she will comfort him. There was nothing bad about what I said.”

“You meant to insult him, didn’t you?! Apologize now! Besides, everyone has to start with their first time.”

“Octavia, you just casually rubbed salt in the wound,” said Hat.

At that very moment, the Earl of Reine arrived. “Edward, Your Highness, apologies for the wait. Oh, and Jessie, too. What’s the matter?”



Jessie was, understandably, unsure how to answer her father. Octavia chanced a furtive glance at Edward, who had his back turned to them, his fists clenched and his face downcast. A fierce, quite tangible aura of rage emanated from his back. If anyone made a poor attempt at apologizing to or comforting Edward, it would likely have the opposite effect. Even Octavia, who was ignorant of the finer points of human interaction, could tell that much. She sat down next to Raven, who had already taken his seat, and gave him another warning.

“No matter what you say now, he’ll resent you.”

“You know, I like the sound of that.”

“I can’t believe that you continue to say such things. You’re dealing with a prince here! You should have more concern for your own—”

“He spoke to me with a look on his face like he knew everything about you,” Raven interrupted, voice irritated. “It’s almost as if he thinks you belong to him.”

Octavia could only blink in surprise.

Raven glared at the other end of the round table, where no one was yet seated. He said bitterly, “This is uncomfortable for me.”

Sighing, Octavia gently placed a hand on Raven’s head. She began tousling his hair.

Naturally, he was unable to ignore this gesture. He raised his voice in reproach. “Stop that. I’m not of an age where I would be pleased to have my hair stroked.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t thinking. It’s only—looking at you just then, I felt like a mother watching her child about to run out into a dangerous street.”

“That’s awfully specific. I’m not pleased to hear it.” Raven fixed Octavia with a censorious glare.

Octavia shrugged and smiled in response. “But just a moment ago, you were concerned about me, weren’t you? Thanks. I guess you are my assistant.”

Raven stared at Octavia, then asked, his voice quieter than usual, “Why didn’t

you get angry? Can I ask you that?”

“Hmm. I suppose I just don’t see why I should have been angry. I guess I just wasn’t interested.”

“Not interested. That’s pretty harsh.”

“I mean, it’s someone else’s affair. We can’t do anything to change others, so I don’t think we should try.” From the moment she had left home, Octavia had considered her connections to Edward, Jessie, and her father severed. This was regardless of what they thought. “I must seem quite a cold person.”

“Octavia, that’s not—” started Hat.

“In that case, this Crow—the Phantom Thief—must be special to you,” Raven pointed out.

Hat shut his mouth.

It took a little while for Octavia to react. “Why should that be the case?”

“I mean, you’ve been extremely angry with him. With me, too. In your attempts to change me, you’ve issued me all sorts of warnings.”

“Hmm. Hmmm?!”

“Hadn’t you noticed?”

Raven was only pointing this out teasingly, but now Octavia was stunned. She held her head in her hands.

“This isn’t the time to be worrying about that. It can wait until later. Don’t even think about it right now! Just forget it,” hissed Hat.

“But somehow,” said Octavia, “I feel like I’ve just realized something extremely important!”

“Her Majesty the Queen and His Highness, the queen’s brother, have just made their entrance! Refrain from speaking!”

Octavia gasped in surprise. From the doorway beside the shrouded dais, a severe-looking man appeared. His cloak swayed in time with his bold footsteps. He had no wings. He looked for all the world like nothing more than a regular man in middle age. But his cloak bore the crest of the royal family. He was

probably concealing his wings.

So that's the queen's brother. The one said to have made imitations of the Heirlooms...

After a delay, a silhouette appeared behind the thin curtain on the dais. On the far side of the table, Edward leapt to his feet, as if repelled by some force. He was followed by Jessie and her father. Learning from their example, Octavia and Raven also rose.

The very moment that the silhouette, with her thin outline, gently sat down in the very center of the dais, Edward raised his voice. "It is in high spirits today, as always, that we greet Her Majesty."

"Edward, desist at once. You have not been granted permission to address the queen directly." The queen's brother cut Edward off. Stepping away from the shrouded dais, he approached the table. "You are indeed before Her Majesty the Queen, but for the purposes of this audience, I, Prince Henry Di Angelus, have been instructed to take charge of proceedings. You may all be seated," said Henry, the very moment he was himself seated at the end of the round table nearest the queen.

As Octavia returned to her seat, Hat snorted above her head. "Hmm! High and mighty as ever. Though I seem to recall him trembling behind us when we struck down God."

"From this point on, I will permit you to address me directly," Prince Henry went on. "I believe we are gathered to discuss the matter of some lost family heirlooms, which should have been inherited by the Earl of Reine. Am I right so far, Earl of Reine?"

"Yes, Your Highness." With an air of composure, Octavia's father rose to his feet. "I submit the following. That misguided daughter of mine—the one who is sitting right over there—said herself that she had no intention of inheriting the peerage before leaving my household. Yet now she seems to be concealing heirlooms that are the rightful property of the Earl of Reine. More specifically, these heirlooms are thought to have been stored in the mansion that was the personal property of my mother, the previous Earl of Reine."

"Is that right? Though it is my understanding that that daughter of yours is,

like the previous Earl, acquainted with my niece Eliza, is she not?"

At a sharp glance from Henry, Octavia sighed. She had heard that Eliza, the Princess Royal, and Prince Henry were struggling with one another to be the next to inherit the throne. It seemed that this audience was, for Prince Henry, less about interceding on Edward's behalf and more about curbing Eliza's influence.

"Indeed. It appears that my grandmother and Princess Eliza were close friends. But that has nothing to do with the matter of the line of the Earl of Reine. With regard to that title, please handle it however you please."

"Hmph! Of course I will. You left, after all," grumbled Octavia's father.

"And if you would like to take the mansion from me, too," Octavia went on, "I invite you to do so at your pleasure."

Octavia's father's nostrils flared, and he opened his eyes wide in indignation. Edward and Jessie, whose expressions had been calm, also looked at her in surprise. Why did they always look so shocked when she obliged them?

"Octavia, are you sure about that?" asked Raven, frowning.

Octavia just shrugged and smiled. "I really don't mind. I'll lose one place to live, but things will work out fine. With that, I wonder if we might consider the matter closed?"

"N-No, wait!" shouted Edward. "The problem in the first place was that you took an heirloom of the House of Reine with you. Until you return it, nothing will be resolved!"

Octavia only smirked. She couldn't return what they sought. She was the only one who could make use of Hat. The Heirlooms Octavia's grandmother had looked after in her mansion had all been registered. Even if she were chased out of the mansion, she wouldn't have any problems, although she would feel a little bit sad to have the house her grandmother left to her stolen from her.

All the same, she knew that her grandmother would laugh at such sentimentality, calling it a trifle. She surely would have said that there were more important things to protect. After all, Octavia had Hat and the other tools.

“Father, before you finally throw me out, would you strip me of the very clothes on my back in pursuit of these lost heirlooms? I can’t say that the thought pleases me, but if that’s what it will take for you to be satisfied, I will accept it.”

“What did you say?”

“But that is where it will end.” Still, Octavia felt the need to draw a line. She raised her head slowly, and everyone at the far side of the table took a collective gasp. “I will not allow any further interference in my affairs. If you can commit to that, I will withdraw. That is the offer I came to make today.”

“What are you saying?” her father stammered. “Why should we...”

“Swear it,” Octavia commanded coldly.

Silence spread through the room. Octavia’s father looked at Edward and Octavia in turn. Jessie clung to Edward, hiding behind his back.

Edward recoiled, as if feeling the pressure of Octavia’s gaze, but he soon opened his mouth again. “Who would listen to what *you* have to say?”

“Silence, Edward. What are you unhappy about?” It was Henry who quickly interrupted Edward, having listened to the discussion so far in silence. “This girl has said that she will relinquish the peerage, the mansion, everything. In that case, the matter is settled. Would you really have me waste my time...” he grumbled. “Eliza hasn’t said anything on the matter, either.”

Goggling at Henry in astonishment, Edward shut his mouth. He had snapped back at Octavia reflexively, without thinking too hard about it. Perhaps he hadn’t realized what Henry was so concerned about, either.

“She said it herself. I will continue with the necessary procedures. The outdated letters patent, or whatever it was you made such a fuss about, can also be annulled at this point. Now then, I will take my—”

“Outdated...letters patent?” came a soft voice. It was like a tiny pebble dropped into a pond, but nonetheless sent out ripples across the room. “I think I know who it was that framed that document.” Her tone was almost like a young girl’s. In some respects, her voice resembled Eliza’s. But it was lighter by far than even Eliza’s voice, with a dreamlike quality.

The queen's speaking voice sounded almost like a song.

"To violate that," she went on, "to take away her rightful claim, the license she was granted, to try and steal these just because you were told that you could, is barbaric. This act—without a shred of the dignity that befits the royal family—is not one I will permit."

"Y-Your Majesty." Henry probably hadn't thought that the queen would chime in. Turning to face her, he continued, "But she herself said..."

Thump, came the sound of something striking the floor. Behind the curtain, the queen had brought down her staff.

"I shall make that determination."

That voice would brook no further objections.

Henry quickly bowed his head. "But please..."

"We shall conduct this matter as we did with the previous Earl of Reine." She was referring to Octavia's grandmother.

This time, the queen rang a bell behind the gauze curtain. Two doors opened on each side of the room, and men in pure white military uniforms entered through them.

Seeing the star-shaped badges gleaming on their lapels, Octavia quietly gasped. *Inquisitors*. Troops under the queen's direct command. Though they were human, they possessed magic and were charged with the recovery of Demonic Heirlooms. These were clearly still very junior inquisitors; they wore few stars on their uniforms.

"SSister. What is it that you intend to do?" said Henry.

"When the previous Earl of Reine inherited her title, her older brother spoke up to challenge her, saying that he was the one worthy of the peerage. To repel this challenge, she chose instead to call herself a detective."

"W-Wait one moment, Your Majesty. Surely you are not saying that she inherited the peerage even though she had an older brother?" asked Edward, needing confirmation.

The queen replied indifferently, "That is correct. The House of Reine also

allows women to succeed as the head of the family. I needn't remind you who granted them that exception."

Looking as though he had been stabbed, Edward shut up. However, Octavia had not known that her grandmother had also had competition for the head of the family.

Her interest piqued, Octavia inquired, "Just how then did my grandmother obtain the peerage?"

"She faithfully executed a request of mine. That request was to aid me in finding imitations of the Imperial Heirlooms, which experienced something of a boom at that time. I asked her whether or not each Heirloom was genuine."

So, in that fashion, Octavia's grandmother had shown her fealty to the queen and had managed to go on living, hiding herself with confidence. Octavia clenched her fists tightly.

"On this occasion, I have a request."

Two inquisitors, who had come to stand beside Edward and Octavia, each took out an envelope. They did this with precisely the same timing and movements.

So from the very beginning, she had already decided what she was going to do. The queen had always been frantic in her search for the successor to the imperial throne. Octavia chided herself for having been too wary of that fact, and also for underestimating the queen as a stateswoman.

"Open them."

Octavia opened her envelope. A photograph fell out. Octavia's mouth curled up in a smile as she looked at it.

I really did underestimate her. For a moment she thought that this had been Eliza's doing, but this felt different. That was because Henry, sitting beside Edward and looking at the same thing, turned pale for a moment.

Perhaps the queen had been aware of what was going on this whole time. The photograph was of a little girl with black hair, hugging a soft toy rabbit to her chest. Even the inscription on the back, "Successful Subject," was the same.

She must have produced an exact copy of Eliza's picture.

"You are to search for this girl. Whether she is alive or dead, you are to bring evidence of that fact before me. That is all." The queen brought down her staff again and rose to her feet. Without another word, she turned on her heel and disappeared far behind the gauze curtain.

Hearing from Octavia how the audience with the queen had unfolded, Eliza frowned. "I see. So my mother brought you the same request as I did." Lost in thought, she looked down at the table. Her cup of tea had gone entirely cold, but this was Octavia's mansion. There was no one to fetch her a fresh cup.

Ann rested on the mantle above the fireplace, having turned back into a doll to ease the burden on herself.

It was late at night, the lights kept dim as possible. In the drawing room, Octavia and Eliza faced each other from opposite ends of a table.

After a pause, Eliza began again, "It looks like the queen has noticed what my uncle has been up to. Perhaps she also knows that I've been looking into his activities."

"The truth is, Hat is opposed to us fulfilling this request."

"Of course I am. It'll only mean peril for us," snorted Hat, standing upright on the sofa next to Octavia.

Octavia, who in no way wanted to inherit the House of Reine, had no reason to fulfill the queen's request. Hat's opinion—that they should avoid the risk of drawing further attention—was quite reasonable.

Eyes downcast, Eliza thought for a moment. "I suppose that is true. It is not my intention to expose you to danger, either. How do you feel about the matter, Lady Octavia?"

"Well, my assistant wants me to accept." Octavia sighed, remembering how Raven's eyes had sparkled, while everyone else had been left perplexed by the queen's unilateral declaration.

The moment he had taken a look at the photograph, Raven had blurted out,

“Let’s do it! It sounds like fun.” Without paying any heed to Octavia’s words of caution—she had, after all, not even decided to go through with it yet—he had launched into unsolicited speculation. “The style of this dress was in fashion over a decade ago,” he’d mused, and then, “This child may already be an adult,” and then, “From the shape of the leaves on the tree outside the window, this must have been taken somewhere with a cold climate.” He’d earned himself quite a fearsome glare from Henry.

On top of all this, Raven had continued to try and pick a fight with Edward, too.

“I think he reasoned that we’d already drawn the attention of Prince Henry and Edward, anyway. Really, think about it—those with a guilty conscience are the quickest to suspect others, aren’t they? Even if I had said I wasn’t going to do it, they probably wouldn’t have believed me.”

“Assistant,” Eliza repeated.

Now that she mentioned it, Octavia realized that she hadn’t explained her arrangement with Raven to Eliza yet.

“I forgot to tell you,” Octavia said. “I have an assistant now. A whole...lot of things happened to bring us together. But of course, I haven’t told him that I’m the rightful successor to the imperial throne, nor anything about the Imperial Heirlooms. It’s a purely professional relationship.”

“Still, though,” Hat pointed out, “if he *is* Crow, the Phantom Thief, those matters certainly concern him as well.”

“Um... For the time being, he seems to be nothing more than an ordinary civilian. You needn’t worry. Though he’s very good at his job. He took care of the paperwork for our audience with the queen, along with all manner of other work.” Octavia thought that it was better to keep quiet about her suspicions that Raven might be Crow, the Phantom Thief. She didn’t want to worry Eliza. Thinking she should do more to put Eliza at ease, Octavia even smiled.

Eliza slowly shook her head. “No, it isn’t that. I was just surprised to hear that you, Lady Octavia, would have an assistant.”

“Is it really so surprising? I feel like a detective and her assistant are practically

inseparable.”

“I’m glad. Glad to hear that Lady Octavia has someone she can depend on.” Hearing Eliza say this so earnestly caught Octavia off guard. Eliza picked up her cold cup of tea and smiled. “The previous Earl of Reine had her husband to fill that role, who had married into her family. Could it be that you’ve already made a similar arrangement?”

“Eh?”

“If so, I must insist on helping you.”

“W-Wait just a moment! Don’t jump to conclusions. Raven and I don’t have that sort of relationship.” Though Octavia did want to hold him accountable for everything he’d done, she was sure that was all she felt. Even now, though, she could feel herself becoming oddly flustered. Her cheeks were beginning to flush.

Eliza, ever keen-eyed, did not miss this. “My, my. So Raven is his name?”

“You seem to have misunderstood me, Eliza. Also, you’re too close.”

“How old is he? What does he do for work? What is his last name?”

Overwhelmed by Eliza—whose pleas were more and more insistent by the minute—Octavia regrettably had to respond. “H-His name is Raven L. Osvard.”

Eliza was stupefied. “Osvard,” she said. “But surely you don’t mean Marquis Osvard? That Osvard?”

“*That* Osvard?” Octavia repeated.

“Indeed. He was the heir to his house, but went missing for many years. Suddenly, one day, he was found. It caused quite a stir at the time, so I remember it well.”

“Missing, you say? Raven was missing?” muttered Octavia.

In front of her, Eliza corrected her posture. “I only know of the matter via hearsay, but...quite some time ago, there was a great fire in the house of Marquis Osvard, and the whole family perished in the blaze. The marquis, his wife, everyone. They were having a banquet to announce the birth of their first son and heir when this terrible thing happened, and so the couple—along with

all their close relatives—were lost. Their line came to an end.”

Don't tell me that firstborn son was Raven? Octavia regretted having asked to hear more. But it was too late to turn back now.

“So, ever since the fire, the peerage and the realm of the Marquis Osvard were entrusted to the royal family. When the rightful heir suddenly returned, alive and well, of course people got to talking. Especially since it was only a coincidence that he was found at all!”

“A coincidence, you say? How could he be found so easily?”

“When I say it was a coincidence, I mean it. I believe it was two years ago, at the festival to celebrate the founding of our kingdom. The Founding Festival is also the biggest gathering of high society there is. Were you aware that, before being granted an audience with the queen, attendees are required by custom to have their blood tested?”

Octavia nodded, silent. It was one of the reasons why her father had been reluctant to give her a societal debut. Falsifying one's lineage in front of the queen, who was herself an angel, was unforgivable. As a result, one's blood must be tested before one could greet her. The device used to perform the test had been created by the empire and lent to the angels by Octavia's ancestors. It was not so powerful as to deserve the name of 'Heirloom.' All it could do was display the relationship between the blood offered to it and the nobles in its register. But Octavia's father, who denied having fathered her, had not wished for her to receive the test.

“According to what I've heard, the marquis, who had come to the party as a mere servant, sustained a scratch from that device by complete chance. The results said that he was the son of the late marquis, and a commotion erupted among the partygoers.”

“So that's why he inherited the title of marquis at such a young age...”

“Whatever the sequence of events might have been, we couldn't just leave him alone, now that we had determined he was a marquis.”

If he had been left alone, it would have been tantamount to ignoring the test they had always used to determine the lineage of the nobles. The angels were

not typically interested in human disputes of power, but they would not forgive any act that could undermine their own authority. Whatever those around him might have thought about it, Raven the servant boy had to be elevated—to become Marquis Osvard.

“Then I suppose,” Octavia began slowly, “he’s suffered quite a bit. Or has he?”

“I should say not. I tend to doubt that his detection was really an accident. Although I suppose he did lose his family in that great fire.”

However one looked at it, it didn’t seem like an enjoyable past. Octavia resolved to ask Raven himself about it. But there was still a small doubt in her heart.

Given who we’re talking about, isn’t there a chance that he fooled the test?

He possessed the emergency activation key that could command the Imperial Heirlooms. It wouldn’t be a stretch to think that he could fool a mere device.

“Well, regardless, in our judgment, he conducts himself with all the refinement of someone born to such a noble status. He also seems to have managed his land well, as we have heard no complaints from the people living there. Young ladies around his age have compared him to a figure from an old folk tale, calling him ‘Cinderella Boy.’” Eliza paused. “Lady Octavia? Is something the matter?”

“Ah, no. Sorry. I was just thinking something over.”

“You need not worry. You have a marquis working as your assistant! He must be awfully fond of you.”

“I keep telling you, it’s not like that.” But with the way Eliza was beaming at her, Octavia decided to give up on correcting the misunderstanding. If they carried on like this, they’d never be able to proceed with the matter at hand. “Enough about him, though, really. Let’s get back on topic. I know that making any contact with the queen would be dangerous, but it would also be folly to withdraw at this point. I think I will accept the queen’s request.”

At Octavia’s declaration, Eliza’s expression became serious again. “So you will succeed the Earl of Reine?”

“I may, or I may not. However...” Octavia recalled something that Raven had said after she had dragged him from the audience chamber and was about to caution him for his behavior.

I thought that running away was the Phantom Thief’s prerogative.

The only reason that Octavia hadn’t grabbed Raven by the front of his shirt right then and delivered him to the police was because she hadn’t had a comeback. She didn’t care about the peerage or the mansion, that was true. But when she’d heard about how her grandmother had fought for the title of Earl of Reine, she’d realized that she was attempting to throw away a thing her grandmother had worked incredibly hard to build.

More than anything, Raven’s eyes had asked her an important question. *Are you a detective or a fugitive?*

Now, sitting here with Eliza, Octavia gazed at the flickering flame of a lamp hanging on the wall.

“I already received the same request from you,” declared Octavia. “As a detective, I wish to be of service.”

After looking at Octavia carefully for a moment, Eliza nodded. “Understood. In that case, please do. You are free to make that choice.”

“I’m still against it!” cried Hat.

“Don’t worry. If I fail, I’ll simply flee to the ends of the earth,” Octavia replied to both of them, laughing. In fact, if she used the Imperial Heirlooms, it would probably be possible to evade capture. Whether or not that could truly be called freedom was another matter entirely.

“Our problem is that we have far too little information,” Eliza went on. “My uncle has an advantage in that respect. Since we last discussed the case, I have continued my own investigation, but as I feared, no information worthy of note has emerged. If this case were so simple, I wouldn’t have brought it to you in the first place, Lady Octavia.”

“I suppose you’re right. But don’t worry. Looking at this photograph a second time made me realize something.”

“What is it?”

“Look at the doll in the photograph.” Octavia did not point at the doll the girl was holding, but at the antique doll lying on the floor. Eliza, now with fresh eyes, immediately looked up at the mantle above the fireplace. Seeing that Eliza had noticed the same thing, Octavia nodded.

“It looks just like Ann, doesn’t it?”

“Y-Yes. It does. Exactly like her. Could it be that the doll was stored in the place shown in this picture?”

“Look at the painting on the wall,” Octavia said. “I don’t know how often you read the newspaper, but that painting has been the subject of some discussion lately.”

Eliza frowned. It appeared that she didn’t recognize it. But, although Eliza had rather simple interests herself, she did receive Octavia’s reports. She said, “Could this be the painting from that investigation you carried out the other day? The one that was said to have been painted with the paint set from the Imperial Heirlooms?”

“The photograph is small, so it’s difficult to tell, but it certainly looks very similar. It could be that the paint set prefers to have people paint this image in particular.”

“Surely you aren’t saying that all the objects in this photograph are Imperial Heirlooms...?”

“That, or imitations of them.”

Gasping softly, Eliza looked up at Octavia. “Then if we seek out the tools in this photograph, we may find this girl too,” she breathed, almost questioning.

“I think we’ll grasp something. But I’d like you to leave the matter to me. I’d like you to keep an eye on the queen’s brother, Prince Henry. Raven managed to utterly inflame him, so he might expose himself in some small way.”

“V-Very well. What a frightful predicament,” said Eliza with a slight air of excitement, holding her hands against her cheeks. “So this is the excitement that comes with solving a mystery! I feel almost like frolicking.”

“It’s habit-forming, isn’t it?”

“Quite,” replied Eliza with a smile and a nod. “I’ll make every effort myself,” she said as she rose to her feet. The motion was so buoyant that she did not appear eight hundred years old to Octavia.

After they had watched her depart, Hat asked, “Are you sure it was all right not to tell her?”

“If I’d said anything, she would only have gotten in my way. This is my battle.”

“But you might have gained some information.”

“I don’t need it.” On top of the photograph on the table, Octavia laid a letter. It was an announcement from Crow, the Phantom Thief, and it had arrived that very morning. Of late he had even been polite enough to address his letters to the owner of the item that was his quarry, to the police, and, of course, to Octavia.

Dear Detective Octavia,

I shall be making my way to the Royal Museum of Art, to help myself to the angels’ music box.

With love,

Crow, the Phantom Thief

That very music box lay on the floor at the feet of the girl in the photograph. Indeed, many of the objects in this photograph—from the doll to the painting displayed on the wall, and now even the music box—were targets of the Phantom Thief’s burglaries. Octavia felt sure that Raven already knew she would notice this, and that he’d encouraged her to accept the queen’s request for exactly that reason.

And then he had taunted her, asking if she planned to run away!

“He’s got some nerve.” In an even lower voice, Octavia muttered to herself, “This time, I swear I’ll break both his legs.”

Perched on a nearby chair, Hat began to quake in fear.

The Royal Museum of Art was—just as the name suggested—an art museum operated by the royal family of the Kingdom of Angelus. It was part of a colossal public park situated on the south side of the Royal Capital, in the fan-shaped portion. In the park, the Royal Museum stood alongside a theater, a library, and other such cultural institutions.

A ticket was required to enter the Museum of Art, but one could come and go as one pleased from the park itself.

Ashton had been waiting for Octavia outside the entrance to the museum. “Just since noon today, we’ve managed to get some security in place for the surrounding area.” He pulled a bitter face, chewing on his short cigarette. “There’s a lot of nosy parkers, you know. Museum’s supposed to be closed today, an’ they *still* tried creeping in! Had my hands full catching the blighters left and right, I did. And before I knew it, the day was getting on. We’re not mucking around ’ere.”

But Octavia had brought Raven—who was rather shrewdly staying behind her—and so she knew that the police’s attempts at installing security hadn’t been terribly successful. Internally, she apologized to Ashton.

That being said, as long as he has the emergency activation key, he can open any door he pleases. It seems he can also assume any disguise that he requires. Now that I think about it, Octavia thought, which is his true appearance?

Crow, the Phantom Thief, had black hair with red eyes. He didn’t even have the same hair color as Raven, so how—

Well, to be fair, she hadn’t quite made up her mind yet that Crow’s true identity was Raven.

There was no smoking allowed inside the museum. After Ashton had properly disposed of his cigarette in an ashtray outside and entered the museum, Octavia silently followed him inside.

“Now, I’ve got to tell you—you two are a special case. The only reason I’m allowed to take you inside is because I told my superiors you were informants with information about the Imperial Heirlooms. Don’t forget it, you hear?”

“But this time, there do appear to be others around—people who are not affiliated with the police,” Raven pointed out, prompting Octavia to look around the room.

A constable stood at every display in the exhibition hall, but here and there, there were clear non-police mixed in with them. Some looked like journalists, but men in black suits had begun to enter the museum from the front door. As they passed Octavia, she saw star-shaped badges glinting on their lapels.

Unconsciously, she lowered her voice. “Sheriffs?”

“Yeah. Someone pretty important is coming...”

“Would that be His Highness Prince Henry? Or His Highness Prince Edward, perhaps?” wondered Raven.

Ashton, who had spoken ambiguously, suddenly came to a halt.

Octavia supposed that this was an affirmative reaction. Surprised, she asked Raven, “What do you mean? Why would those two be involved with one of the Phantom Thief’s crime scenes?”

“Why, of course they would stick their noses into our business. Consider the circumstances. They’d surely like to have a grasp on everything you’re investigating, wouldn’t they? We’re in competition, after all.”

“What’re you lot talkin’ about?” Ashton butted in, his tone menacing. “You’re right that Prince Edward’s just shown up with some of his helpers. I dunno whether they came for security or surveillance, but they barged right in without a single care for our situation. They’ve been a proper nuisance, but what about them? Friends of yours?” There was more than a hint of a grudge in Ashton’s eyes and voice.

Unconsciously, Octavia averted her eyes—but then they met Raven’s.

“Octavia, may I explain?” he asked after a moment. “The heart of the matter does concern your family.”

“Y-Yeah. Go right ahead.”

There were no objections from Hat, either.

Ashton’s brow was furrowed. Although he was in charge of this prospective

crime scene, he was only there because of the Phantom Thief's letter. It was very likely that he had been called up here with no knowledge of the surrounding circumstances.

Raven gave Ashton a brief and easily understood explanation of the issues surrounding the inheritance of the House of Reine. As he did so, the furrows in Ashton's brow grew steadily deeper, so that Octavia was almost worried they'd stay that way permanently.

"In other words," said Ashton slowly, "they don't give a fig about the Phantom Thief, after all. They just came to watch you while you fight to be head of your family! What, am I just caught in the crossfire, then?"

"Though it pains me to say so..." Raven trailed off sadly, nodding.

Ashton's face screwed up. He stumbled over to a nearby wall and leaned against it. "This is why," he growled, "I can't stand *those bloody angels!*"

Raven put in, "In that case, you've done very well to become a police inspector, haven't you?"

"Shut it, you! Ah, bugger it all. Now I feel a right idiot for being so wary, wondering what on earth was going on. I'm just here trying to do an honest job. I just wanted to catch Crow, the Phantom Thief." However rough around the edges he was, Ashton really did his job seriously.

Octavia thought for a while, then said, "About that, Ashton. As far as you can tell, do the items Crow has targeted up until now—or else already stolen—have anything in common?"

"Anything in common? The owners, that sort of thing?"

Raven's eyes widened, but soon enough, his customary smile had returned. Nor did he ask any questions. Right before his eyes, Octavia nodded confidently.

Ashton, righting his posture, shook his head. "Nah. When I was assigned the case, I rifled through all the files we had from the investigation, but the owners couldn't be more different. Nor were they acquainted with each other. My first guess is always a personal grudge, and I investigate accordingly, so there's no doubt on that account. Incidentally, the types of items he targets also appear to be all over the place. The only clear common thread seems to be that he's

targeting Demonic Heirlooms.”

“I see. In that case, have you ever seen this girl before?”

“Huh? Is this to do with the queen’s request you mentioned a moment ago?” asked Ashton. “Oi, no, wait! Are you sure you can show me that? If I see it, won’t I get drawn into your whole dispu—”

Octavia thrust the photograph under Ashton’s nose as he tried to back away. She knew there was a chance that Ashton would notice what else was shown in the photograph, but she didn’t much care. After all, they were both pursuing the same Phantom Thief; she had begun to feel a budding camaraderie with him.

Ashton cowered. “W-With the picture this close, I won’t be able to see much more than her fa—” Suddenly his eyes widened. It was plain that he had noticed something.

“Have you noticed something? If so, I’d like you to tell me.”

“No,” he stumbled, “nothing, really—”

“However much you investigate, it will be futile, Octavia.” Suddenly, from around a corner, a voice called Octavia’s name. As the speaker approached, flanked by two men in black suits, Octavia blinked.

“Edward.”

She had only called him by his name, but Edward raised his eyebrows and clicked his tongue. “There’s nothing to be done about your lack of decorum, is there? You are to address me as ‘Your Highness.’”

“Ah, sorry. I just can’t seem to shake this reluctance to address you respectfully...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Anyway, what are you doing here?” Octavia went on, ignoring him. “Are you hoping to catch Crow, the Phantom Thief?” Thinking that he might have noticed something, Octavia probed him judiciously.

Edward only snorted. “Surely it’s only natural that I would want to keep an eye on you.”

Ashton made an extremely irritated face. Raven covered his mouth with his hand, as if he were trying to stifle laughter.

Still smiling herself, Octavia took her time in seeking confirmation. “Is that all?”

“Who do you think you’re speaking to?”

“Well, if that’s all, then fine. Suit yourself.”

“I am not here at my leisure, either. But my victory is already as good as decided, since you won’t be able to find that girl.”

“What does that mean?”

Hearing the change in Octavia’s tone of voice, Edward let out an audacious laugh. “If we were to find the girl first, you wouldn’t be able to. Even a child could follow such simple reasoning.”

“You’re not telling me that you’ve already found the girl, are you? It hasn’t even been three days since the audience!”

“We are in the Kingdom of Angelus. And *I* am a prince of the royal family of Angelus. Let me counter your question. What made you think that I couldn’t find her?”

Even so, it would have been impossible to find the girl in such a short span of time—unless, that was, one had known of her identity and whereabouts from the very start.

Hat cried, “Don’t tell me this ends with us finding out that uncle of his was harboring the girl this whole time!”

Octavia had the same fear as Hat. If that were the case, she would have to rethink everything, starting with her hypothesis that the girl had some connection to Crow, the Phantom Thief.

“All you can do is struggle in vain,” said Edward. “I’ll amuse myself by watching you struggle and by disposing of any scoundrels who might be lurking about.” With a last furtive glance at Raven, Edward walked past Octavia’s party and left.

When they could no longer see Edward and his men, Ashton inquired of

Raven, “Does that prince have it in for you or something?”

“Yes, though all I did was say hello to his fiancée recently. How frightful! This is why I can’t stand vir—”

“Let’s go, Raven! Ashton, please guide us.” Octavia raised her voice to drown out that word that was best left unspoken.

Ashton goggled at her for a moment, but he didn’t seem to want to explore the matter any further. He shrugged, then walked toward the far end of the corridor that Edward had entered from.

They were shown to a large exhibition hall near the rear of the art museum. Sitting forlornly atop the glass display stand in the center of the room was the music box. Standing in front of it, Ashton murmured, “There are a number of Demonic Heirlooms on display in the Royal Museum of Art, though their powers have been sealed by the queen. This music box is one of ’em.”

Just like the map from the train. Sometimes given as gifts to nobles, the Demonic Heirlooms had become fairly scattered throughout the kingdom. Since she had come to the Royal Capital, Octavia had learned that they were popular as works of art. Many people wanted to own a piece of history, apparently.

In most cases, the Heirlooms were still strictly tracked, so if Octavia had carelessly tried to register one she would have found herself charged with burglary. Therefore, unless one of them was obviously running amok, Hat had ruled that they should not take action. Though the queen’s seal only rendered them dormant, as long as they were not activated—in short, as long as no one tried to use them—they were safe to be around.

It looks like this time, it would be best to devote our efforts to keeping it safe. Of course, if Crow carried it off, that would be a different story; but if an exhibit simply vanished from the Royal Museum of Art, that would draw attention.

“How about it? ’Ave a look at it yourself. Is this music box the real thing?”

“It’s real, as I expected,” Octavia said, approaching the display stand.

Ashton’s shoulders slumped. “Is that right,” he muttered. “Well, of course, we wouldn’t expect a fake in the Royal Museum of Art.” Ashton was probably still bothered by the fact that, last time, the object of Crow’s burglary had been

swapped for a fake before its theft.

“Are you confident in your security?” asked Octavia.

After a pause, he replied, “Everywhere except wherever that high and mighty prince was mucking around.”

“Did Edward do something?”

“He was doing *something* all sneaky-like, but I don’t know what. Chances are, it was just something to make life hard for you, though. Even if he hadn’t, the Royal Museum of Art is secured with all sorts of magical gadgets, so it can get a bit confusing.” Ashton went to pull out a fresh cigarette, then stopped. Apparently he had remembered that there was no smoking allowed in the museum. “Right. Thanks to them, I can’t even ’ave a smoke. I heard that smoke would set off one of those security devices.”

Octavia said, “Only five minutes until the time specified in the announcement, huh?” She glanced at Raven out of the corner of her eye.

He grinned back at her. “Why, that’s right, isn’t it?”

“Where do you think the Phantom Thief will enter from?”

“Beats me! I haven’t a clue. The Phantom seems to be able to appear and disappear at will.”

“From the ceiling, I bet,” Ashton said. “Doesn’t he always? We can at least depend on him to arrive on time, but I bet he’ll talk some rubbish about liking high places.” Ashton’s haphazard speculation was enough to cause Raven’s smile to harden, which in turn caused Octavia to burst out laughing in spite of herself.

Hat guffawed atop her head. “Very good, then! Come at us from the ceiling! Even if you don’t, we’ll still have a good laugh—”

Crack, came a sudden noise, then darkness suffused the museum, blinding them.

“What?! Don’t tell me it’s Crow!” cried Octavia.

“It’s not yet time,” answered Raven, of all people.

Something unexpected was happening. Octavia heard the crash of broken glass and braced herself. Something was on the move. However faint, she also sensed the presence of magic.

“Raven, you’re still there, right?!” she cried. “Stay close to me!”

“Eh? Whaa—” At Octavia’s warning, Raven let out a cry of confusion.

Octavia reached out toward him through the darkness, but she only brushed against his fingertips, missing his hand.

“Raven?!” Surely he wasn’t about to commit his burglary! But the next noise she heard was a thump, as if he’d just fallen on his backside.

At the same time, the music box started to chime. Hat cried, “Oh, no! The music box will be activated, Octavia!”

Ashton issued a command to turn on the emergency lights, and the room flashed into brightness again. Octavia hurriedly looked over her shoulder to see Raven sprawled on his backside, stunned. In one hand, he held the music box. It was playing a lullaby.

“Raven, are you all right? What happened?”

“Something...flew at me through the darkness, all at once. It was probably the music box. After that, I felt something like a cord pulling on my legs, and I fell over...”

“Is the music box intact?!” shouted Ashton, running over.

Raven’s stunned expression hardened for a moment, but it was soon replaced by his usual smile. He closed the lid of the music box. The lullaby stopped.

And that was all. There seemed to be no more suspicious activity from the music box.

“It doesn’t appear to be broken in any place. But I couldn’t tell you what just happened. By the way, what was the time in the Phantom Thief’s letter, again?”

“How unsightly, Raven L. Osvard!”

Just as they heard a loud voice echo through the exhibition hall, they also began to hear a bell ringing from outside. It was the bell in the park that

announced the time. They knew then that it was time for Crow, the Phantom Thief, to appear.

“To think you would feign an accident, just because your attempt at theft failed.” In his neat black suit, Edward closed the distance between them with long strides. In one smooth motion he drew the rapier at his waist and thrust the point of the blade just under Raven’s throat.

Octavia, in shock, asked, “What are you talking about, Edward?”

It seemed that Octavia wasn’t the only one who was slow to take his meaning. Raven, with the point of Edward’s sword at his throat and the music box still in his hand, stared back blankly. Ashton too looked perplexed.

After taking a look at their faces, Edward snorted with laughter. “Can’t you tell? This scoundrel just tried to steal the music box. That failed, so he’s trying to fool you by playing it off as an accident.”

“Huh?”

“That music box was equipped with a magical booby trap. A trap that winds a rope of magical energy around the ankles of anyone who tries to take it, preventing them from running away.” So that was why Raven had fallen flat on his backside.

Ashton’s voice became harsh. “Oi, I’ve heard nothing about that! What are you doing putting booby traps on a property I’m in charge of securing without telling me?”

“I received permission from His Highness, the queen’s brother. We couldn’t simply entrust its protection to the police, who have been so thoroughly hoodwinked by Crow, the Phantom Thief, up until now. Really, you should be thanking me. This did prevent its theft, after all,” said Edward. “Well, now, we’ve caught him in the act, so arrest him at once.”

The sheriffs who had been waiting behind Edward moved swiftly, taking the music box away from Raven, who was still sitting on the floor, and grabbing him by his arms.

Ashton’s face reddened. “Don’t tell me you plan to arrest this mug as the Phantom Thief?! Who’d believe such an idiotic story? No matter how you look

at what just happened, there must have been an accident or something!”

“Idiotic? Indeed, it was idiotic. This man was a complete fool. To think he would just reach out and grab the music box, not knowing it was booby trapped.”

“The glass case the music box was in shattered from the inside,” said Raven quietly, as the sheriffs forced him to his feet. He gazed at the display stand. It was true—there were shards of glass scattered on the floor around the base of the stand. “The music box came flying at me by itself. And now, all this commotion.... Your Highness, Prince Edward. What contrivance did you *actually* place on the music box?”

Edward took the music box from one of the sheriffs. With Raven’s cold eyes trained on him, he raised the corners of his mouth in a smile. “I already told you, didn’t I? A contrivance to catch the criminal.”

“Hey, wait just a minute. With that excuse, and that trap, this almost feels like child’s play. I must confess, I am shocked,” said Hat.

“There were already rumors that this scoundrel had sold someone a Demonic Heirloom. And now this. I’m sure we’ll find other skeletons in his closet. You shouldn’t have gotten involved with Octavia. You can regret that choice in jail for the next month or so.” Edward, sheathing his rapier, looked at Octavia with a triumphant expression. “Now you have no more fools willing to work with you.”

Octavia, who had been standing there, stunned, came back to her senses. *Could it be that this is my fault?* Edward had simply wanted to prevent Raven from helping Octavia look for the girl in the photograph. For that reason alone, he intended to throw Raven in jail.

To be sure, Octavia did suspect that Raven might be Crow, the Phantom Thief. Even so, Edward’s motivations and methods were unjust.

“To think that an almighty angel would resort to such underhanded tactics.”

Edward laughed in Ashton’s face. “I’ll choose to take your insolence as sour grapes and ignore it on this occasion.” He turned on his heel, then. The black-suited sheriffs who followed him dragged Raven along with them.

He can't be caught by them, for this. And not by me.

She didn't know what to do. "Raven!" She could only call his name.

Raven managed to turn his head and look back at her. "I'll be fine. This should be fun."

"Again with that—"

"Farewell."

Octavia knew not what he meant by that. But Raven simply turned to look ahead once more, took a step forward by himself, and did not turn back again.



It was early in the morning that the fountain pen returned. Octavia, who had been lying on her bed, unable to fall asleep, sensed the pen arrive. She leapt up from her bed. Still in her pajamas, she turned to face the pen as it floated into her bedroom.

"Thank you, fountain pen. Did you manage to meet with Eliza? Did she send a message?"

The fountain pen performed a little twirl, then began to write glowing letters in the air.

Lord Raven is unharmed. Treating a marquis too tyrannically would attract criticism, and so they have decided to treat him as a witness. I suppose their objective is ultimately to prevent him from making contact with you, Lady Octavia. He is being kept under confinement, but I have no doubt that, once this is all resolved, he will be released.

"Thank goodness," she sighed. The shameless way in which Raven had been arrested had left Octavia troubled.

Hat slid off the bed, then crawled along the floor before finally sluggishly pulling himself upright. "What's all this? Has Eliza already sent a reply?"

"Go back to sleep, Hat."

"I can't very well do that, can I? Fountain pen, continue."

In answer to Hat's dozy command, the fountain pen began to smoothly write in the air once more.

There is a more pressing problem, however: the whereabouts of the young girl. Edward has requested another audience with the queen. It would seem that he wishes to report that he has found the girl, as she requested. An audience very like the one we had recently will likely be held shortly. As early as tomorrow.

"Tomorrow?!"

Just as you requested, I looked into the tools we saw in the photograph, but I only found the music box in the Royal Museum of Art. I could find no record of others in the inventory of the royal family of Angelus, and thus no record suggesting that we might be storing them. However, I have learned that when my uncle reported his discovery of the music box to my mother, she sealed its powers and donated it to the Royal Museum of Art. It seems that she will have it returned to the museum as early as tomorrow. I must apologize profusely for having no information of use to you. Although we have little time left, I will inform you the moment that I learn anything further.

The message seemed to end there. The magical letters in the air disappeared, and Octavia took the fountain pen and stood it up in the jar she kept on her desk. This was the fountain pen's favorite spot.

"Thanks, You can rest now. You were a great help."

Octavia sat down on the side of her bed. Eliza's message had been reassuring. Still, she sighed.

"So the deadline is tomorrow. No matter what I do, there just isn't enough time."

"In fact, today is all we have left. But that's fine, isn't it? All we'll have to do is move out of this mansion. If you ask Eliza, I'm sure she'll find you a new place to live in no time."

“But will Edward and Father really stop at that? Besides, it’ll be very difficult to take all the tools with us when we move.”

“Well,” Hat conceded, “yes, I suppose it would be.”

“Moreover, I have a bad feeling about all this,” muttered Octavia, before flopping down on her bed and looking up at the ceiling. Though the room was still dim, no light coming in from outside, she covered her eyes with one arm.

What did he mean by that, saying “farewell” so suddenly? Raven had not been arrested as Crow, the Phantom Thief. He had only been detained to spite Octavia. He would eventually be released. Even Raven should have been able to predict that much. He would have at least been considering what efforts he could make to see that he was released. He wasn’t the sort of person to take such abuse lying down.

“Why did he say ‘farewell,’ I wonder,” sighed Octavia.

“You’ll have to ask him. Not like he’d really answer you, though.” Hat came to sit beside Octavia. “I wonder if there was something else to it. Some threat that his identity might be exposed, perhaps?”

“In that childish booby trap, you mean? All Edward did was manipulate the music box so it would hit Raven and knock him down once the lights went out. To say he was caught in the act just based on that is strange.”

“Then perhaps he just didn’t want to get involved with the royal family in the same way as us. How about that?”

“But then he wouldn’t have attended the audience in the first place. And knowing him, he would run away if he were cau—” Tugging at her bangs as she thought, Octavia froze. *That’s right. Raven can escape.*

“I guess you’re right,” Hat went on. “If he really is Crow, the Phantom Thief, then he has the emergency activation key. If we suppose he can use the Imperial Heirlooms, then, provided he isn’t in the royal castle’s tower of confinement, he should be able to escape any jail. And go anywhere—Octavia?”

Octavia, surging to her feet, opened her chest of drawers and pulled out a change of clothes.

Hat leapt on top of her head. “Are you going out somewhere? It’s still early, you know.”

“Today is all we have left. I’ll need to submit a request to meet with Raven, so I’d like to move quickly.”

“Yes, yes, but what are you going to do?”

“I’d like to turn my thinking upside down. Just like Prince Henry, who was able to find the girl.”

Octavia tore off her pajamas and threw on a white blouse. Seeing this, Hat turned into an adorable bonnet and settled atop her head. Then he spoke. “That would be dangerous. Your vision is liable to cloud over, and you will only gather evidence that supports your assumptions.”

“I know that. But we’re running out of time.”

“All that being said, this bonnet doesn’t really suit you, does it? Hmm. How about this?” Looking over Octavia’s outfit in her full-length mirror, Hat tried this and that style of hat to find the right one for the day. He did this every day, of course.

“I’m a detective. I should be able to do things differently from the police.”

“I suppose you have a point. Hmm... This one doesn’t seem quite right, either...”

“Lady Octavia, are you awake?” With perfect timing, Ann’s voice chimed in along with a knock on the door.

Having just finished changing, Octavia answered her. “Yes! Come in. You’re up early, Ann.”

“I heard from the other tools that you were having trouble getting settled, Lady Octavia.”

“Really? Aren’t my tools just splendid? I can always count on you.” Octavia turned around with a smile, causing Ann, who had entered with a tray, to blush slightly.

“Well, I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve brought you some light refreshments. Would you like to partake?”

“Thanks. I’ll have that for breakfast. By the way, Ann, do you really not remember anything from before you were registered? Just making sure.”

It was Raven who had sold the malfunctioning Ann to Mrs. Smile. He had played it off as a mere procurement, of course. Thinking back on it now, though, it was very likely that Raven—knowing Octavia’s true identity—had decided to take full advantage of the choice Mrs. Smile and Colette had made, and to relinquish the doll he had held onto as a Demonic Heirloom.

Ann placed Octavia’s light meal on the table. She blinked, then assumed a serious expression. “In the course of being repaired, any data I had in my memory at the time was erased.”

“Do you remember anything at all? It doesn’t matter how faint a memory it might be. Anything like, for example, where you were when you were still broken. Or what form you took, or... Ah, that’s right!” The photograph of the girl was still in Octavia’s pocket. She showed it to Ann. “Do you recognize anything in this photograph? Look, this humanoid doll here is you, isn’t it?”

Ann took the photograph from Octavia. Her eyes widened. “This antique doll—why, it certainly looks like me, but I wonder if it might not be an imitation.”

“That’s what I thought—that it wasn’t you after all.”

“If I were to be anywhere in this picture, I think it would be here.”

Seeing Ann point at the girl, Octavia looked up in astonishment. “You’re the little girl?!”

“No, the soft toy she is holding. The rabbit,” murmured Ann. “Perhaps before I could return to my usual form as an antique doll, I took this shape. At least, that’s the feeling I get...”

“Do you remember anything else? In particular, about the young girl holding you.”

Octavia was now grasping Ann by her shoulders. Ann looked surprised, but she still inclined her head and pondered the question.

“I wish that I could, but...I cannot recall anything about a girl of this age. Even with Colette, I only have the haziest feeling of nostalgia.”

“This would have happened before you were given to Colette. Did you have any notable owners before her?”

“I only have the feeling that my owner changed many times. And as this happened many years ago, I can no longer distinguish them.”

Octavia sighed. Hat said reproachfully, “Don’t be so unreasonable. Her recognition faculties were damaged. It can’t be helped.”

“You have my deepest apologies. I changed hands so many times—there were so many children, so many little girls and boys.” Ann handed the photograph back.

“I see.” Octavia was despondent for a while, but then seized upon something. She stared hard at the girl in the picture once more. “Boys too, you say? Now that you mention it, in my grandmother’s memoirs that I borrowed from Raven, there was something about...”

“Lady Octavia?”

“Ah, nothing. Don’t worry about it. Hmm. Come to think of it, Ashton noticed something about this child, too.”

Last night, Ashton had been lamenting the sudden arrest of Raven as a suspect, and the fact that the music box, which had been the Phantom Thief’s quarry, had been carried off by Edward. The prospective crime scene had fallen apart bit by bit, leaving Ashton unable to speak properly.

“If it’s Ashton we’re talking about, we can probably find him staying overnight in the police station. He’s probably swamped with the paperwork left over from yesterday,” Hat pointed out.

“Then we’ll visit the police station first. After that, the art museum.”

“The art museum? You mean the Royal Museum of Art? Why would you want to go there again?”

“I’d like to have a look at the music box to confirm something. Ann, sorry to ask this of you, but could you throw together some food, so I can give some to Ashton as a snack and have some for lunch?”

“If that’s all, then I already have a number of dishes ready and waiting in the

kitchen. If you would like to take some with you—” Ann glared at Octavia, who had scarfed down all the sandwiches on the table in one or two bites each.

“Lady Octavia, that’s bad manners.”

But Octavia proceeded to drink her milk in one gulp, before firing herself up for the investigation ahead. “Let’s go, Hat. The investigation is underway.”

“Hmm! In that case, the most appropriate style of hat would be this, I think!”

“I will see you later, Your Majesty. Please don’t forget to conduct yourself like a queen.” Ann’s parting words were a little sarcastic, pricking Octavia like barbs.

Still, she grinned. “I’m a detective, you know.” And to prove it, Octavia now wore the classic deerstalker hat on her head.

Ashton, who had dark bags under his eyes, wordlessly accepted the paper bag Octavia thrust toward him.

“Some refreshments,” she said. “I figured you’d probably been working nonstop since yesterday.”

“Thanks. That’s very thoughtful of you. But if I had to choose, I’d have preferred for you to just let me sleep.”

“Sorry, but I have places to be, too. I’m busy today myself.”

“You’re brazen, ain’t you? Well, I suppose you have to be, to be a detective, innit?” Scratching his head through his tousled hair, Ashton showed Octavia to a chair at one end of the police station. He pushed the pile of documents on the desk in front of it to one side, then set the paper bag on the desk. “Now then,” he said, “what d’you want?”

“I’d like to visit Raven. How should I go about it?”

“Ah, well—usually, you would make that application through the police, but he isn’t being detained in one of our cells. For some reason, he’s in the earthbound palace. I hate to say so, seein’ as you just got here an’ all, but you’ll need to take your inquiry there. Though I reckon you can still make an application at the reception desk downstairs.”

“Do you remember that photograph I showed you yesterday? The one with the child?”

Without delay, Ashton had bitten into one of the baguette sandwiches in the paper bag. Now, he froze mid-bite. But he soon assumed a nonchalant expression and sat down in his chair. “I suppose I do. What about it?”

“You recognized the child in that photograph, didn’t you? Give me information.”

“You’re awfully blunt.” Still, Ashton took a big bite of his sandwich, chewing it and swallowing, before he finally answered. “What happened yesterday is being handled as a failed burglary attempt by Crow, the Phantom Thief. A gag order’s been put in place regarding the details. D’you see what I’m getting at?”

“That you don’t want to get involved with this case? With me?”

“Very astute. I value my salary too, you know.”

“But the baguette sandwich you’re eating right now is a bribe.”

Ashton, who had just swallowed his second bite, looked incredulous. “You really think I’m so easily bought?”

“Well, then, suppose that sandwich has poison in it. I’m the only one with the antidote.”

Ashton choked on his third bite. He recovered with a strained smile on his face. “Y-You are joking, right...?” Seeing Octavia stare steadily back at him without answering, a hint of panic started to creep across his face. “Oi, that was a joke, right? It’s a crime to do that sort of thing!”

“I guess you’re right,” she said after a long pause. “It was a joke.”

“Really? Cor, but with that attitude, you really do seem serious! Oi, this is not a laughing matt—”

“Don’t you hate letting the angels walk all over you?”

At this, Ashton buttoned his lips.

Lowering her voice furtively, Octavia continued, “If you cooperate with me, not only will you get to pay the angels back, they’ll end up owing *you*. I think.” Octavia thought that if she asked Eliza, it might be possible to get Ashton promoted.

Ashton frowned. “You *think*? What d’you mean, you think?”

“At the moment, I’m working on pure inference. So I’m looking for a hint, however small. What did you notice about the photograph, Ashton?”

Ashton continued eating his baguette sandwich in silence.

“How about we use one of the tools to probe him, Octavia?” suggested Hat.

Octavia shook her head slightly. They were running out of time; they couldn’t afford to expend so much effort to obtain information that may or may not have even really helped them.

Moreover, thinking of future cases, it would be better for Octavia to have Ashton’s cooperation. Frowning, she waited patiently for Ashton to finish eating his sandwich.

After he swallowed the last bite, Ashton let out a long sigh. “It’s only idle talk. I have no files to support it whatsoever.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I heard a rumor—a number of children around the girl’s age were said to have gone missing very recently. I simply reacted to the thought that you might be involved somehow.”

“Missing? Do you mean they were kidnapped?”

“Dunno.”

“‘Dunno,’ you say? You’re a police inspector, aren’t you? Is this not a case?”

“Right you are. It’s not. And if we, the police, don’t have a case, we can’t carry out an investigation,” Ashton replied carelessly. “In the first place, we don’t know their identities. The rumors only go as far as to say that some orphans, scattered throughout the slums, haven’t been seen recently. The only people who’ve come to speak to me are their employers, whinging about the loss of labor. Yet still the case was quickly taken out of my hands.”

“Taken out of your... So the children were found?”

“According to the higher-ups, they were.” From his tone of voice and the fact that he wouldn’t look straight at her, Octavia could sense the disdain and

irritation behind his words. He seemed to want to leave it at that, leaving Octavia to infer the rest for herself.

“So there was pressure from above,” Hat wondered, sitting on Octavia’s knee. “But who on earth would have done that?”

But Octavia knew that, even if she threw that question Ashton’s way, she probably wouldn’t get an answer.

Ashton took a cigarette out of his jacket pocket and lit it. “Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a case, anyway. It was most likely just a few runaways. There was no common thread between the children who went missing, not in terms of the circumstances of their births or their family relationships. Well, besides the fact that they were all girls with black hair.”

Octavia’s eyes widened.

Ashton blew out a stream of cigarette smoke. “That’s enough, right? Sling yer ’ook.”

“Thanks, Ashton! I promise I will repay this favor!”

Octavia leaned across the table and mimed giving Ashton a peck on the cheek. Startled, Ashton recoiled, taking his chair with him, but this was an earnest expression of affection from Octavia.

Following what Ashton had told her, Octavia made her way to the reception desk on the first floor of the palace and applied for a visitation with Raven. She’d thought that she would be sent packing, but, contrary to her expectations, she was simply told to speak to the sentries in front of the palace just after noon. And just like that, her business at the police station concluded.

“So,” mused Hat, “young girls with black hair—just like the one in the photograph—have been going missing, have they? Furthermore, someone behind the scenes put pressure on the police to stop them investigating the matter. Was it the queen’s brother?”

There was that possibility. Octavia had immediately suspected that he had found the girl in the photograph too quickly. Such speed indicated that either he had known the girl’s whereabouts from the start, or that for some reason he

knew he did not need to investigate them. And now that Octavia knew that multiple girls had gone missing, the latter scenario seemed increasingly likely.

“The queen’s brother may think that the girl in the photograph is already dead. Eliza did say there was a catastrophic accident in his research.”

“Right. And frankly, even if he did know where she was, he would’ve considered her unwanted evidence of his experiments. He would have disposed of her at once. But, well, I suppose she was a successful test subject, after all. That would be a helpful clue, if only we knew what test it was that succeeded.”

“Next is the art museum. It’s nearly time for them to open, right?” Octavia put her hat back on and left the station. Outside, she saw that the sun had risen completely. People had begun to fill the streets.

As Octavia set out resolutely toward the Royal Museum of Art, Hat whispered in her ear, “You’ve got an inkling, haven’t you? Tell me.”

“I’m not certain yet.”

“You mean you can’t even tell me, your sidekick?! That won’t do at all!”

“But you’re all-knowing and all-powerful, aren’t you?”

At this, Hat grumbled something unintelligible. It was so silly that Octavia couldn’t help but laugh.

The gates to the park and the Royal Museum of Art had already been unlocked. Octavia was crossing through the park, avoiding the children who played there, when she noticed a group trying to enter the museum from another direction. She stopped in her tracks.

Someone who looked like one of the museum curators emerged from inside, greeting the group. What first stood out to Octavia were the men dressed all in black—sheriffs. But even more remarkable was the man greeted by the curator. He had no wings, but he wore a cloak bearing the crest of the royal family.

“Well, if it isn’t Prince Henry! Could it be that he knew you were coming, Octavia?” exclaimed Hat.

“No, he couldn’t have. It’s a coincidence.” However, this was a good opportunity for Octavia to test whether or not her deduction was correct. She

slowed down so her face would not immediately be picked out of the crowd. The curator conducted Henry into the building along with the sheriffs. Keeping a fixed distance from the group, Octavia followed.

Perhaps because it was only just after opening time, there were few people inside the museum. Some stood blinking, watching Henry pass by, but no one there seemed compelled to cause a commotion. This was in keeping with the notice on the wall: *Keep quiet inside the museum.*

Just as she turned a corner, following them, Octavia caught the sound of a voice: “To think His Majesty, the queen’s brother, would come personally to confirm the seal on the music box.”

She pricked her ears up.

“Well, I had some time on my hands,” Prince Henry replied. “Edward said there was no change, but I want to be sure. Tell me truthfully. Have you noticed any difference?”

The curator was busy selecting a key. He appeared to be trying to open the door to the exhibition hall directly facing Octavia, the very one she had visited yesterday.

“No. We have observed no change. Her Majesty’s seal is intact. The damage sustained was limited to the breaking of the glass case that surrounded the box on its display stand. Now, please, enter.”

Hiding on one side of a large set of double doors, Octavia peered inside the hall. It had been left in exactly the same condition it had been in yesterday. For security, all the other exhibits had been moved, leaving only the stand where the music box was displayed. The case upon the display stand was still broken; shards of glass were scattered across the floor around it.

“I believe I am correct in saying that this is the first time that one of the Phantom Thief’s burglaries has failed,” the curator added. “I have discussed the possibility of displaying the music box as you see it now, for a limited time, with the other museum staff.”

Gazing intently at the music box, Henry made no sound to indicate that he was even listening to the curator, passionate as he was. He slowly reached out

to grasp it.

The curator was startled. “Y-Your Highness! That is dangerous! If by some small chance the lid should open—”

“Up until now, has the music box ever started chiming by itself before?”

“Huh? No, of course not! Would that not mean that Her Majesty’s seal had failed?”

“I suppose it would,” replied Henry, seeming to smile slightly. “Don’t worry. It won’t open. The seal...is intact.”

The curator watched Henry return the music box to its case and breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ve taken up enough of your time. I’ll be leaving now.” Attended by the sheriffs, Henry turned on his heel.

Octavia panicked and fled behind a corner further up the corridor. Fortunately, it seemed that no one had noticed her, and Henry left without delay. But as she caught a glimpse of his face in profile, she noticed the faintest hint of a suppressed smile. The curator locked the door to the exhibition hall again. Following Henry, he left as well.

Pursing her lips, Octavia stood in front of the door to the exhibition hall. From the door hung a placard reading “Authorized Personnel Only.” It seemed that the re-exhibition of the music box was still some ways off.

“What do you want to do,” said Hat, “break it open? We don’t have a tool that can *gently* open the lock. Though if we did, it would be the emergency activation key.”

“No, there’s no need. I’ve learned what I wanted to know. Just seeing Prince Henry come to check on the box, I think I can be confident in my own deduction.”

“What, so you also wanted to confirm that the queen’s seal was intact? Well, I must say that, at the time, I did wonder whether the music box might have run amok—” Hat broke off mid-sentence, coming to the same realization as Octavia. Yes, at that moment—when the trap set by Edward had put the box in

Raven's hands—the box had *not* been running amok. It had simply chimed like a normal music box. “Hmm, hmm? You mean there's nothing strange about that, assuming Raven is Crow, the Phantom Thief? Is that what you're saying?”

“I don't think Prince Henry is at all interested in searching for the Phantom Thief.”

“I guess you're right. If he were going to search for anyone, it would be the girl in that photograph. Hang on, I just got a really nasty feeling about this! Don't tell me that the reason the Phantom Thief can use the emergency activation key is—”

Because the angels experimented on him to make him able to use the Imperial Heirlooms. Crow had said as much from the very beginning.

“Let's go visit Raven.” Octavia turned away from the entrance to the exhibition hall.

From atop her head, Hat pondered all this for a moment before inquiring, “Why... How did you figure it out? You're so bright, I'm scared.”

Octavia shrugged. She didn't think Hat's words sounded particularly like praise. “I simply thought about what he meant by ‘farewell.’”

“What are you doing, spouting a line that sounds like it's straight out of a romance novel? At least pick something from a detective novel!”

I couldn't agree more, thought Octavia to herself. She had no intention of acting out a romance novel. Therefore, she couldn't allow Raven's farewell to become true parting words.

After hailing a hansom cab and riding it up to the front of the palace, Octavia noted that the sun had reached its highest position in the sky. Just as she had been told at the police station when she'd announced to the sentries her intention to visit Raven, she was only made to wait a short while before she was escorted to a tower on one side of the palace's facade. It was a respectable tower, about as tall as the palace itself. But Octavia could sense the presence of an enchantment on its entrance. It seemed that she would be closely observed during her visit.

“When the angels build places to confine people, they sure do tend to build towers, huh? Is it just down to taste?”

The prison the queen had built for members of the imperial bloodline of Ercadia, as part of her castle in the sky, was also said to be a tower. But right now it wasn't Octavia who was being imprisoned, but Raven. With a peculiar feeling in her heart, she climbed the tower's spiral staircase to the top floor. No sentries moved from the entrance to guide or observe her, perhaps to maintain the pretense that this was not a place of confinement. In reality, the surveillance enchantment already in place probably made it unnecessary.

But no mere enchantment could track the presence of an Imperial Heirloom. Keeping her voice low so that her words would not echo through the tall tower, Octavia said to Hat, “Just to be safe, I'd like to make it so that we are not overheard.”

“Then you'll want the curtain, I should think. Its true purpose is to merge with its surroundings, hiding you from sight, but I can also arrange it so that it won't let your voices pass through.”

“Please do.”

Hat answered Octavia's wishes, quietly reciting a few words in the language of the empire. She wondered if Raven could hear them. Just as she was thinking this, she reached the top of the stairs.

“Raven.” Octavia called his name.

Raven, sitting in a chair and reading a book behind the hefty bars of his cell, looked up. “Octavia. Hi.” He closed the book and rose to his feet.

Raven's cell was so spacious and looked so comfortable that it might—if not for the iron bars between them—have been mistaken for a guest room. There was a carpet spread across the floor, a bed, a bookshelf, and even a washbasin. Raven's complexion also looked healthy enough.

Seeing that Eliza had spoken the truth, Octavia was relieved. “You seem well,” she remarked.

“That's because I know that the treatment of suspected criminals is ordinarily harsh. But Mrs. Smile was questioned about the case of the doll, and she

apparently objected most vociferously on my behalf. And it looks like there are others who have been kind enough to express their concern.”

“Most of your well-wishers are women, are they not?”

“Jealous, are we?”

“Why would I be? Under the circumstances, am I not more likely to be worried about you?”

“Well, you are the only one to have come all this way to see me.” This caught Octavia off guard, and she found herself at a loss for words. While she was searching for something to say, Raven picked up his chair and moved closer to the bars. “I’m only sorry that I don’t have a chair for you.”

“I don’t mind. Once my business here is concluded, I’ll be going home.”

“That’s awfully cold of you. Especially as I seem to have been caught up in a scheme to inconvenience you. First thing this morning, I was subjected to much gloating from Edward; it’s been rather unpleasant. Oh, that’s right—the young lady Jessie came as well.”

“So I’m *not* the only one to have visited you here.”

“This was when I was taken out for questioning. He had nothing to say that didn’t irritate me.”

Octavia sighed. “I’m hoping you didn’t try to pick a fight with him again.”

“Of course not. I gave him my undivided attention and a smile. But no matter what I do, I seem to remain in Prince Edward’s bad books. Though the young lady Jessie was friendly enough.”

Even in such grave times as these, Raven seemed to be calm enough to tease Edward. Jessie, too, was still inescapably herself. She couldn’t possibly think that she had this man in the palm of her hand, could she?

“I’ve heard that His Highness Prince Henry has found the girl in the photograph. I also heard that his audience with the queen has been confirmed for tomorrow.”

“Not a problem. I’ve also found her.”

It was somewhat pleasing to see Raven, always calm and collected, with his eyes as round as saucers. Seeing him scrutinize her cautiously also felt good, like she finally had him wrapped around her little finger.

“Found her, you say?” he said after a pause. “It would appear that His Highness found her first, so what exactly do you mean?”

“Prince Henry merely produced a fake. I heard from Ashton that, recently, black-haired girls like the one in the photograph have gone missing. I would say that he sought out children with no relatives in preparation for this.”

“That certainly sounds plausible. I did think that he had found her a bit too quickly.”

“Moreover, the genuine article is right here,” said Octavia.

Raven was silent.

Octavia continued dispassionately, “I have a favor to ask of you.”

After another pause: “Of me? That’s a first. But right now, I am kept under lock and key.”

“His Highness the queen’s brother went to the trouble of visiting the Royal Museum of Art to confirm the seal on the music box. He might have realized the same thing I did. That being said, he only heard of the incident secondhand from Edward, so his final act of confirmation is still to come. He cannot be certain yet. So I’ve come to ask you to do your best to obfuscate the matter to the very end. That’s what I came to ask of you.”

Raven said nothing.

“If we can but overcome this, you will be able to leave this place. I will make it so. You will be able to leave here *as yourself*.” Gripping the iron bars, Octavia peered unblinkingly into Raven’s eyes. “So please, do not flee from anyone but me.”

Octavia was sure that when he had said farewell, that was what he had meant. He had been planning to flee. He had thought that he would have to, after setting off the music box.

All the other witnesses had been so relieved that the music box had not run

amok—sealed as it was by the power of the queen—that they hadn't realized the significance of what had happened. The music box had been placed in Raven's hands unexpectedly, and without thinking he had activated the music box simply while trying to protect himself.

Prince Henry, too, had realized that the impossible had happened. And he knew what experiments he had carried out in the past. But Octavia knew now that there was another—someone besides her who could safely activate an Imperial Heirloom.

The Phantom Thief.

A successful test subject... It would, of course, have been insensitive to ask what experiment had been successful. Raven had once told her that he wanted to be free. And she remembered Crow laughing—laughing at how the angels wanted so badly to use the Imperial Heirlooms.

The man she saw through the bars right now had been born and reared for that purpose.

"That's all I came to say."

"Are you really sure that's all? Is there nothing else you'd like to ask me?" Raven queried Octavia.

Octavia was incredulous. "If I did ask, would you answer me honestly? I mean, you?"

"So there's no trust between us then. What do you intend to do with me?"

"How like a criminal to ask that. But unfortunately, in this case, you were falsely accused. So I'm getting you out of here. Isn't that obvious?"

"I don't quite take your meaning. You're a detective, aren't you? So shouldn't you expose the truth?"

"It's not the job of a detective to make the truth known to the world." Octavia smiled at Raven, who looked back at her suspiciously. "I'm happy being the only one to know the truth about you."

Now that she'd said it, it felt right, and Octavia was relieved. She was set on uncovering this man's secret, but she really had no interest in making it public

knowledge. She just couldn't let things end with him fooling her. That was all.

With a sigh of affirmation to herself, Octavia opened her eyes. "So this is what my grandmother meant when she said that I must try being fooled by a bad man. I see, I see. This is what that feels like."

"Surely you're not talking about your views on marriage under these circumstances?"

"If you're really such a bad man, then don't disappoint by fleeing from such pitiful threats as this." Taking a step back, she gazed at Raven, who looked troubled somehow. *These bars are in the way*, she thought. She couldn't observe him to her satisfaction. Therefore, she would have to resolve this matter at once.

"I'm going to free you, all right? And things will be as they were again. And then I will catch you."

"Can you really call that freedom? I have my doubts."

"You can't have freedom without restrictions, or so my grandmother always said." Laughing to herself, Octavia was about to turn away when Raven grasped the iron bars.

"Just how do you intend to rescue me?"

"That's a secret. A detective wouldn't tip her hand so easily." With a wave of her hand, Octavia started to descend the staircase. Raven looked as if he still wanted to say something but couldn't put it into words. To have a secret, like in a conjuring act, was not the exclusive purview of the Phantom Thief. Everyone had their own secrets.

Even detectives and the queens of fallen kingdoms.



Whenever Octavia walked away, she did so without hesitation and with an air of gallantry. Raven waited for the sound of her heels on the steps to fade into the distance; when it finally did, he sat back down in his chair somewhat roughly.

I didn't think she would catch on quite this quickly. Raven had planned to

make his escape as early as tonight, but this posed a problem. Now he thought that he would like to wait and see what she would do.

“What to do?” Raven muttered to himself, but no answer came. He did not mind being figured out by Octavia. Though her methods might have seemed crude, she paid close attention to her surroundings, and her instincts were good. It had been a lot of fun to watch her fret as she came to realize that he was Crow, the Phantom Thief, but couldn’t find any evidence to support her conclusion. Octavia was sharp enough that he found he had to dedicate himself to a game of cat and mouse with her, instead of simply working to expose her secret—that she was the successor to the imperial throne.

But thinking that he had been targeted by Prince Henry simply because of who Octavia was made Raven want to throw up. A swift escape would be the best course of action. Claiming the title of Marquis Osvard had merely been the outcome of winning a bet, so it was not as if he felt particularly attached to it. And it was only out of a desire to feel the liberation of using his own powers freely—and to toy with the royal family that had so mercilessly tampered with him—that he had started to play the role of Crow, the Phantom Thief.

Looking back on his life up until now, it would have been perfectly understandable if he had turned to thoughts of revenge, but he had never felt that urge. It had all been a game to him.

Come to think of it, Raven didn’t really know who he was or where he was from. Therefore he could be whoever he wanted to be and go wherever he wanted to go. Anything he acquired could be thrown away. That was his strength. And he thought it was a fair price to pay for playing dangerous games.

The only thing he had to do was ensure that the emergency activation key was not taken from him, but most likely there was no one capable of doing so. They had not managed it at the laboratory where he had been a test subject. That had been precisely what made him a success, in fact.

Still, maybe—just maybe—Octavia might be able to do it. If so, all the more reason to run away now. So why am I sitting here with my arms crossed, thinking about it? While Raven was groaning to himself, his ears suddenly picked up the sound of footsteps once again. He knew that, right now, there

was no one being held in this tower besides him.

Someone was coming up the stairs. He only heard one pair of footsteps. At first he thought that they might be bringing him his meal or something, but when he saw who emerged at the top of the staircase, he grimaced. It was Prince Henry. The man who had built the laboratory where Raven had once been held.

“Raven L. Osvard, I presume.” His expression was dignified, but he couldn’t hide the cloying look in his eyes. Raven knew that look very well. These were the eyes of an angel who coveted the tools of the empire.

“I know your history. Let’s leave it at that. I never would have thought that you had survived that explosion. You did well to evade me. And on top of all that, to think you managed to claim the title of marquis and boldly live that lie.”

Raven was silent a moment. “I wonder what you might be referring to. Do you mean the accident that befell the house of Osvard? If that is what you mean, as a member of the royal family, you should know better than I that it was only an accident.”

“So you still intend to play dumb. Well, fine. I will soon know for certain. As long as I have you, I can resume my research. I’ve even had time to train replacements for the researchers you killed.”

Just as Octavia had feared, Prince Henry was onto Raven. But still he maintained his smile, feigning ignorance. Though he intended to run, he was not so kind as to simply tell Henry, “You’re right.” Still, if he did run, he knew that would be tantamount to the same admission.

“If you submit to me, I am willing to let you remain a marquis.”

“I am afraid I do not quite understand what you are trying to say. If you are referring to the reason I am here, that was a false accusation.”

“If my elder sister were to learn of your powers, you could be mistaken for a scion of the empire and sentenced to a life of confinement in the royal castle. Not allowed to flee or to die, but kept under lock and key for the rest of your life.”

Huh? Raven blinked in surprise. *A life of confinement? Not execution? Not*

death? This was the first he'd heard about it. He had always heard that descendants of the imperial bloodline were hunted down with extreme prejudice by the queen's inquisition, and were considered villains who exploited their ability to use the empire's dangerous heirlooms to overthrow her rule. This was at least what the wider population understood. Could that understanding really be wrong?

Seeing Raven's expression, Henry laughed. "We angels have surprises of our own. But in the tower of confinement, far up in the sky, you won't be able to use the Imperial Heirlooms. The tower was built for that very purpose. Compared to a life there, wouldn't it far preferable to cooperate with my research and continue a life of privilege as a marquis?"

In that case, Octavia—or Her Majesty the Queen, heiress to the empire, as the Heirlooms called her—would not be killed if her true identity was made known, but instead imprisoned until her death?

The thought of this shook Raven for some reason. This tremor caught Raven off guard, penetrating the very bottom of his heart, as he realized something most unwelcome. *She would end up just like me?* Just why was she so set on saving him? He was no longer listening to Henry, who continued to opine how much better off Raven would be, receiving his patronage. He grimaced now out of regret for his own foolishness, that he had thought only of fleeing and not of remaining to finish uncovering Octavia's secrets.

"I've made every concession for you. Surely you are not unsatisfied with this arrangement?" said Henry.

What should I do? pondered Raven, his head spinning. Then he heard Octavia's voice echo inside his head.

So please, do not flee from anyone but me.

"For the time being, once tomorrow's audience is concluded, I will have you moved to my palace."

"I am extremely pleased to have received your attention, but I must apologize. I still have no idea what you mean by research, or anything else you've been saying."

“What did you say?”

“Perhaps you are under some sort of misapprehension? Alternatively, you might have me confused with someone else.”

Henry still hadn’t managed to wring any sort of commitment out of Raven, who only grinned back at him.

Henry began to raise his voice. “Do you really think you can defy me and still live?”

“You might very well say that, but I still haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about. In the first place, if I really had the sort of powers you’re talking about, wouldn’t I have been able to escape from here in the blink of an eye?” Henry, growling, found himself at a loss for words. “More importantly,” Raven went on, “I am innocent, so I believe I will be set free. The detective is surely investigating on my behalf as well.”

“Hmm. Again with that woman. Edward has been wanting to put her in her place for some time now. Perhaps it’s because they’re able to inherit the earldom, but the women of the House of Reine have often been quite insolent. Ah, but in the end, she is naught but a human female. There’s nothing she can do.”

This man, who stood here sneering at Raven, knew nothing about Octavia. Raven should have been fine with that, but hearing him insult her really boiled his blood. For this single moment, he actually looked favorably upon the likes of Edward, who at least considered Octavia a hated enemy.

Henry let out a deliberate, exaggerated sigh. “I consider myself a generous man. When tomorrow’s audience is concluded—when you have at last reached the judgment that this so-called detective cannot save you—I will pose you the same question. Then, I think you will change your mind.”

“But the contest is not decided yet, is it?”

“It is. No matter how much Eliza tries to help her, there is nothing she can do in such a short span of time. And if the unthinkable were to happen, in the worst case, I would simply have to offer you up as a sacrifice. Even if you decide to tell them everything, that woman will not be able to protect you.”

That was right. If anyone was in a position where they might have to run away, it was Octavia herself. After all, she was the *real thing*.

“If you asked me whether or not I was a gambling man, I’d say yes, I am.” Still, Raven pushed down his feelings deep inside and smiled back at Henry. “And I’ve never lost a bet. Not once, to this day. And I don’t plan to. Not ever.”

Taking Raven for a sore loser, Henry laughed this off and turned to leave. After waiting for the sound of his footsteps to fade away, Raven slammed his head and arms against the iron bars of his cell.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake...”

He couldn’t help but love dangerous games. Games he could only choose to play because he was free. The feeling of superiority that came with taking the initiative. More than anything, it made him feel alive. He had never felt afraid.

But this was the first time he had ever felt such pain from a gamble, pain in the pit of his stomach. Was he to place his trust in Octavia or not? Realizing that this bet alone was causing him such trepidation, the only thoughts that came to him were of self-deprecation.

“Perhaps this is what it feels like to be caught?” Having both of his legs broken sounded less painful. But the Phantom Thief was not to be trifled with. Grasping the iron bars with both hands, Raven breathed in and out, slowly opening his eyes.



To match her checkered deerstalker cap, an Inverness cape billowed behind Octavia. Ann had said firmly that if she was going to be a detective, this was the only outfit for it. Ann had scolded Octavia, saying, “Though I *would* like to see you dressed like a queen once in a while,” but everyone knew that such a day would never come.

Thus Octavia entered the audience chamber with her head held high, knowing that right now, she was a detective.

It was all the same as the last time she’d been here, from the round table to the people sitting across from her. The only difference was that Raven would not be sitting beside her. Also, there was a little girl sitting next to Prince Henry.

She had black hair and clothes that exactly matched those of the girl in the photograph.

“I shall henceforth submit my report regarding the request I received from Her Majesty the Queen,” declared Henry solemnly, in the manner of a judge declaring his court in session. Immediately, he turned to face the dais where the queen was sitting. “I received word from Edward that this is the girl depicted in the photograph, Your Majesty. If you look at her and the photograph in turn, I think you will see that this is obviously true.”

“Certainly, she does look to be the spitting image. I did not think that you would manage to find her so quickly,” answered the queen dispassionately. Today, as ever, she was hidden behind her curtain of gauze.

“That I was able to find her so promptly was, I believe, thanks to Edward’s abilities. He is quite well-versed in earthbound matters. I hear that he also had the cooperation of the Earl of Reine.”

It seemed that to Henry, ultimately, the current matter hinged on the question of the succession of the House of Reine, and that he intended to ensure that it was Edward who would succeed. Jessie and Octavia’s father looked relieved. Edward turned to look triumphantly in Octavia’s direction.

“All you did was land that bothersome fellow in jail by way of a petty trick. It’s not worth getting angry for his sake, Octavia,” said Hat.

“I am surprised to see that she is alive,” said the queen lightly. “According to the information I possess, she should have been caught in an explosion.” This was a challenge to Henry’s story. Octavia felt her blood run cold. Just how much did the queen know?

Could it be that she knew everything?

But it seemed that Henry had anticipated this much. Without hesitation, Henry answered, “I believe that Edward has something to report concerning that matter. Edward?”

“Yes, uncle. I address this to mother—to Her Majesty, the Queen. There is an inscription on the back of the photograph. It is written in the script of the infamous empire, and it means something to the effect of ‘successful test

subject.’ Therefore, I came to the conclusion that there are still rebels loyal to the empire, hatching some plot against us. As I was reviewing all the incidents the inquisitors have investigated up until now, I discovered the existence of a questionable organization that was conducting research on the subject of eternal life a few years ago.”

“Then you are saying that this girl is the successful product of their research?”

“As a matter of fact, she does not appear to age very much. We think that this might explain why her appearance has not changed. These researchers were probably trying to obtain the longevity of angels for themselves. Though this research constitutes blasphemy towards Your Majesty, as you are a being of eternal life, I investigated further in accordance with Your Majesty’s wishes. Unfortunately, due to an accident in their laboratory, no records remain. I can only express my deepest regrets that this girl lost her wits as a result. She can no longer speak, you see.”

“Are you telling me this girl cannot talk?”

Henry, receiving a glance from Edward, pushed the girl forward. “It appears that her larynx was crushed in that same accident.”

Octavia gazed at the girl’s profile. The light of life had gone out of her eyes. If Octavia’s deductions were correct, the poor girl had merely been caught in the crossfire of this squabble.

“No doubt they crushed it themselves. Vulgar bastards,” said Hat, indignation in his voice. Octavia clenched her fists.

“Your explanation seems to be consistent. Now then, Octavia—it was Octavia, was it not?”

If Octavia simply nodded and said nothing. This would end with her losing the earldom of Reine and her mansion. Once, she had thought that this would free her from all these irksome squabbles, and she had not minded.

It was you, Raven, who told me not to run away. There had been no word so far that Raven had escaped. Therefore, it was safe to assume that he was still waiting quietly for Octavia to free him.

“Have you any objections, Lady Octavia?”

“My Queen, that girl is a fake,” Octavia casually declared. The room fell silent. But only for a moment.

Almost immediately, Edward pounded on the round table and shouted, “Why, how dare you speak to Her Majesty the Queen with that tone?”

“I’m terribly sorry, but in the first place, I am not good with words, and when it comes to formalities, I have even less confidence that I’ll be able to get my point across. You don’t mind, do you, Queen? In exchange for your leniency, I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“Men-at-arms, seize this woman. This is treason.” It was Henry who directed this command.

He was cut off by the queen’s laughter. “Very well. For now, I shall allow it.”

“But Mother! What example will that set?!”

“However,” the queen continued, “if you have no evidence to back up your claims, I will have you arrested for treason.”

At this judgment, made without hesitation, it was Edward and Henry who fell silent.

“That doesn’t bother me. Thank you, Queen.”

“It does appear that you are the one who most closely resembles the previous Earl of Reine.”

As Octavia turned to face the queen, she heard the end of her staff strike the floor behind the curtain.

“Now, then, explain yourself. On what basis can you claim that this girl is a fake? And just who is the girl in the photograph?”

“First of all, in the past few days, there were reports of young girls with black hair disappearing from the slums of this city. When the police tried to investigate, pressure from above forced them to give up the case.”

The girl with vacant eyes turned to look at Octavia.

With a chilling smile on his face, Henry glared at Octavia. “What, so you’re saying that I picked the girl based on that alone? What a baseless accusation.”

“True, there is no evidence. And I am sure that none will ever emerge. So that is all I have to say on that account.”

After being cut off, there was a subtle change in Henry’s expression. But Edward was as prideful as ever. “That won’t wash, Octavia. You’re just trying to pick holes in our report.”

“But I do have an ironclad argument as to why this girl is a fake. It can be found in the photograph.” Octavia took out her copy of the photograph and placed it on the round table.

“There are many things in this photograph besides the girl, are there not? A doll. A painting. Perhaps the most disquieting thing is the lipstick. And finally—a music box.”

Edward and Octavia’s family all wore expressions of doubt, but Henry frowned heavily. Something Octavia had said seemed to have worried him. Before he could say anything, Octavia answered the question on everyone’s lips.

“All of the items in this photograph have been targeted by Crow, the Phantom Thief.”

Henry was not aware of anything to do with the Phantom Thief. If there was a weakness Octavia could exploit, this was it.

“And all the items targeted by the Phantom Thief were tools of that selfsame empire. Therefore, this girl was photographed with a collection of Demonic Heirlooms.”

“And what of it? That’s a mere coincidence, surely,” shouted Edward in irritation.

Octavia simply shook her head. “Could so many matches between the photograph and Crow’s quarries be nothing more than a coincidence? That simply cannot be. Even if that were the case, it wouldn’t change the fact that the girl in this photograph is surrounded by Demonic Heirlooms.”

“Ridiculous! You’re talking about Demonic Heirlooms. If that were true, there is no way that the girl in that photograph could be ali—”

“Edward!” shouted Henry, but it was too late. Edward looked bewildered. He still hadn’t realized what had just slipped his tongue.

“That’s right. She couldn’t be alive. She couldn’t be standing in front of us today.”

Edward met Octavia’s eyes, then, after a beat, turned deathly pale.

“I wonder if producing a fake in response to the queen’s request constitutes treason.”

Henry turned around and glared directly at Octavia. But before he could think of an excuse, Octavia took the initiative.

“But of course, there is still a possibility that the girl in the picture is alive.”

Now Henry’s complexion clearly changed as well.

“Now, then, if the girl in the picture were still alive, where might she be today? What might her relationship be to Crow, the Phantom Thief? Firstly, I considered why Crow might have targeted the items depicted in this photograph. Why, out of all the many Demonic Heirlooms, did he prioritize these?”

Why had Raven decided to steal the Heirlooms in this picture? Why would he do that, knowing that if put one foot in the wrong place, he would be in danger of exposing his own identity? Octavia felt the corners of her mouth turn up in a smile.

Because it seemed like fun, right? That was the sort of man he was. She knew that. But the truth of it all was so overwhelming that it was enough for her to know—for Octavia to be the only one to know. To know everything about his true identity.

“It is only natural to conclude that he must have done it to conceal his identity. That is why Crow took on the persona of the Phantom Thief.”

“Wha—” Henry was about to say something, but he was interrupted by the sound of the queen’s staff striking the dais.

A voice, lower and with more feeling than before, sounded from that raised chair. “Speak your conclusion, Octavia.”

“The girl in this photograph *is* the Phantom Thief.” First, a spoonful of truth. But that alone would not be enough.

Edward cried. “Impossible! The rumors say that the Phantom Thief is a man. Police testimony has said the same thing!”

“My grandmother’s collected memoirs had much to say about the Demonic Heirlooms. The lipstick you see here is said to give the user the ability to change their appearance however they wish. One could become a child or a crone, a man or a woman at will.”

“If so, it sounds as if you are saying that the Phantom Thief—in other words, this girl—is able to use the Imperial Heirlooms?”

Now I have her. Octavia smiled thinly at this question from the queen. “My Queen, you have a vague notion, do you not? As to who that girl might be.”

The queen must have been aware of any investigations undertaken by Eliza. In that case, she could have simply left this matter to her daughter. So why had she gone to the trouble of bringing the photograph to everyone’s attention herself? Because there was something she simply had to know.

Therefore, Octavia offered the queen the answer she wanted, as bait.

“I am confident that this girl is the one you seek. And there is a way for us to be sure.”

Octavia saw the queen’s silhouette move, as if she had leaned forward.

“Are you sure about this, Octavia?” Hat asked, pressing Octavia once more. *Yeah*, she replied, nodding internally.

“I have faced Crow, the Phantom Thief, many times. There is something I have kept from one of our encounters, thinking that it might one day prove a crucial hint in finding out his identity. It seems that on one occasion, Crow was injured. This is a playing card stained with his blood.” So Octavia declared, taking out a playing card that she had deliberately stained with her own blood.



“You have the device, don’t you? The one that can test for a person’s blood relations?”

As for whose relations, that I won’t say. Of course, Edward and Octavia’s family, who knew nothing, would say nothing—but neither could Henry, who would not wish for it to be known that he had produced a fake, nor that he had worked to create a test subject in order to utilize the Imperial Heirlooms. They could not prevent the queen of the angels from seizing upon an incorrect answer to her question—that the girl in the photograph was Crow, the Phantom Thief, and a scion of the empire.

“You need only to check.”

Raven L. Osvard was not a descendant of the imperial line. Therefore, Raven would definitely be set free. But he could never become the Phantom Thief again. If he did so, he would lose his freedom. This was the same thing as saying that Octavia had put the Phantom Thief’s crimes to an end; she had in essence captured him.

“I am certain that the answer you seek is here.” With a daring smile, Octavia presented the playing card to the queen.

This was a frightfully dangerous gamble. At the very least, the queen would learn that an imperial heir was still alive.

Thinking of Raven, I really shouldn’t smile. However... The joy of finally being able to catch that man won out over the fear of her own survival, of being discovered. Octavia didn’t quite know what to call this feeling she had, but she was sure that her grandmother would have forgiven her.

You were fooled by a bad man, weren’t you?

I was, Octavia would have replied, prompting laughter and praise from her grandmother.

“Now then, Queen.” *I’ll let you have that title, so let me go on being a detective. Otherwise, I won’t be able to catch the Phantom Thief.*

Behind the gauze curtain, the queen rose to her feet, as if hooked by Octavia’s bait.

A voice descended suddenly from the ceiling: “One.”

At the sound of it, Octavia opened her eyes wide.

“Two.”

There was a commotion in the corridor outside. A sentry came barging in.

“What is the meaning of this?” cried Henry at the sentry.

The sentry replied, “We’ve received a message from the police! Crow, the Phantom Thief, has stolen the music box from the art museum, and now he’s made his way he—”

“Three!”

The stained glass in the ceiling of the audience chamber shattered, falling down in shards. Reflexively, Octavia raised her hands to protect her head.

“Protect the queen!”

“Octavia, the card!” shouted Hat.

“Ah.” Prompted by Hat, Octavia realized that the playing card she had just presented to the queen had vanished from her hand.

“I can’t let you do that, Miss Detective.” The Phantom Thief was suspended amid falling shards of stained glass, which glittering all around him with reflected light; he planted a kiss on the playing card and smiled. “I can’t let you get away with exposing my identity with this little playing card. I’ll be taking this back.”

“Why, you... Give that back! I need it—”

“Now, then, Your Highness, Prince Henry the Foolish. I’ve come to exact my revenge.”

“Y-You what?” Henry, who had been cowering on the floor, raised his head. He likely had no idea how to deal with this sudden development. He looked more pitiful in this moment than Octavia would have ever thought.

Crow made the playing card vanish, like in a conjuring act; he produced the music box in its place. Octavia goggled at him, shocked.

“Don’t tell me he intends to activate it?!” cried Hat.

“I should have done this from the very start. These are your just deserts.” Crow forced the music box open, then hurled it at the prince.

He hadn’t simply activated it. He had torn away the queen’s seal upon it. It no longer played the clear melody that it had played last time. Now, it played out of tune, and a black mist spilled out of it. As if it had already determined its target, the mist began to make its way toward Henry, who was crouched on the floor nearby.

“Before the queen’s seal was placed upon this Heirloom,” said Crow, “its last owner was you, Prince Henry.” In other words, now that the seal was broken, the Demonic Heirloom would consider Henry to be its user. Underneath his mask, Crow sneered. “Now, then—go mad as it engulfs you.”

Seized by the black mist, Henry let out a scream.

“Why, he’s sent the box amok!” Hat cried, finally regaining his composure. “The cur!”

Panicked, Octavia shouted, “Wh-What should we even do in this situation?!”

“Simple. We’ll let Her Majesty stop it.”

At Crow’s cavalier answer, Octavia turned to look beyond the gauze curtain.

Just as she did so, she heard the queen’s staff ring out as it struck the floor. The curtain billowed upward, and a magic circle rushed out from behind it. The queen’s magic circle soon engulfed the area around the music box, even as it continued to spout black mist. Eventually, with a creak, the lid of the box closed again. The music box, no longer playing its tune, fell down from where it floated in midair.

Octavia instinctively reached out to grab it, but it was snatched away from her. Crow had taken it.

Quite unexpectedly, Octavia now found herself facing Crow at point-blank range. She gasped. From this distance, she could see his beautiful red eyes perfectly. But before she could blink, this flash of color vanished, and a shadow descended over her in its place.

“Ah!” cried Hat.

Something stifled Octavia's mouth. As she opened her eyes, a sweet sensation withdrew from her lips.



“You won’t catch me just yet, Miss Detective.”

Octavia heard a blood vessel burst somewhere around her temple. “H-How dare you,” she said slowly, “k-kiss me...a *second time*?!”

Crow floated back into the air, laughing gleefully. “Ha ha ha ha ha!” In his right hand, he held the music box. With his left arm, he was holding the young girl who had been brought here to serve as an impostor for the girl in the photograph.

Forgetting her fury, Octavia cried, “Wait, what are you planning to do with that girl?!”

“She met with this fate while standing in for me. I don’t mind performing the odd act of charity.”

The girl was unable to speak and could only goggle in astonishment. She timidly looked up at the Phantom Thief. Feeling her gaze on him, Crow looked back at her with a surprisingly kind smile on his face.

“It’s not as if you have a home to go back to, right? You might say we’re in the same boat.”

She was silent.

“I’m happy to abduct you, if you wish. It’s your decision to make. Now choose.” The way Crow phrased this would have set anyone’s teeth on edge. But the girl, her eyes as wide as saucers, simply nodded in response.

“That’s settled, then.”

“Wait! Stop! That man is definitely up to no good! He’s tricking you!”

“That’s awfully harsh, Miss Detective.”

“Come down here at once! Before you get the chance to fool that innocent girl, I’ll break both your legs! I swear I will!”

“Is that jealousy I hear?”

“Huh?! ”

Tucking the girl under his arm, the Phantom Thief bowed gracefully. “Well, bye for now, everyone. *Think you can catch me, Miss Detective?*”

The queen's staff rang out again, shuddering as she slammed it against the floor. As soon as she had done so, however, Crow had vanished, as if by sleight of hand.

Atop Octavia's head, Hat murmured in astonishment, "What do we do? The way things are going..."

"What did he say just now?"

It was not Hat who answered Octavia's question, but the queen. "He invited you to catch him if you can—Detective."

In other words, they were back to square one. Once again, things were just as they had been after that first infuriating kiss. Octavia slammed her fist down on the round table—*bang!*

Why, that cad... He's got some nerve!

"Now," proclaimed the queen suddenly, "I will state my decision regarding the request I made of those gathered here."

Octavia wasn't the only one startled by this. Her father—who in the recent commotion had retreated to one of the walls in the room, taking Jessie with him—now gingerly approached the table again.

"F-Forgive my impertinence, Your Majesty, but I really do not think this is the time for that..."

"Th-That's right, Mother. Uncle is..." Edward, clinging to the round table, used only his eyes to point in Henry's direction.

Henry still cowered on the floor, trembling and holding his head in his hands. He didn't appear to have been injured, but however one looked at him, his condition was clearly abnormal. He had only just begun to be dragged to the other side, but Octavia had not brought him back using the correct steps, after all. Most likely his consciousness had been consumed by the other side.

"Leave him. We do not even know if he is in his right mind."

Hearing the queen dismiss her brother with such indifference, Edward could not help but speak up. "You can't mean that!"

"He would be facing punishment, in any case. To think that he would dare to

try and deceive me, bringing an impostor before me.”

“Th-That’s only according to Octavia! Nothing has been prov—”

“Well, then, Edward, is it true that you produced a fake, just as Henry claims?” asked the queen in an icy tone.

Edward gulped and fell silent.

“Recall what the Phantom Thief said—that the girl was brought here to stand in for him. In other words, can we not say that he did, in fact, acknowledge that the girl in the photograph was him? Detective Octavia. Your deduction—that the girl in the photograph was Crow, the Phantom Thief himself—was correct.”

Though this was indeed the case, Octavia’s feelings on the matter were complex. *It was only proven to be true because the Phantom Thief admitted it himself.* In other words, did Crow not still have her in the palm of his hand? She didn’t feel pleased in the slightest.

“You, Detective Octavia, have fulfilled my request.”

“P-Please, wait, Your Majesty!” Octavia’s father, reading between the lines, spoke up in a pitiful voice.

Jessie, realizing the same thing, turned deathly pale and clung to Edward. “P-Prince Edward. Do something. You’re a prince, aren’t you?!”

“Be quiet. This is unsightly.”

At the queen’s cold declaration, Jessie shrieked, gulped, and gingerly looked up at the dais where the queen sat, her eyes full of flattery. “M-Mother-in-law, I only—”

“Edward. Take that wretched woman with you and leave this chamber at once.”

“M-Mother... I find your choice of words to be uncalled for...”

The queen declared, “The next Earl of Reine shall be you, Lady Octavia.”

Jessie let out a tiny scream, and her father turned white as a sheet.

“Y-You can’t... I beg you to reconsider, Your Majesty!”

“I suppose you’re right,” Octavia interjected, “but I must respectfully decline.”

“That’s right! This girl is not worthy of leading the House of Reine...” Octavia’s father trailed off, looking at her with a daft expression on his face. “Eh?”

Edward and Jessie were also startled.

“What did you say just now?” Even the queen felt the need to seek confirmation.

Octavia, feeling fed up, repeated herself offhandedly. “I said that I decline. I have not fulfilled your request, my queen. That was all merely a hypothesis. All we can say for certain is that the targets of Crow’s burglaries are shown in the photograph. We still have no way to verify the girl’s identity. With all the material evidence carried away by Crow, we cannot discover his true identity, either.”

“But Crow admitted it himself.”

“Can you really believe the words of such a rogue? Perhaps that really was the girl from the photograph, and he only claimed otherwise to sow discord amongst us! She certainly appears to be in the photograph. Therefore, there’s every chance that she could have become one of Crow’s targets.”

The more Octavia tried to explain the counterarguments, the more fascinating they became. Probably Crow had only appeared in order to prompt Octavia to say these things.

Choosing her words carefully, the queen murmured, “I have information which suggests that Henry did indeed conduct unethical experiments.”

“I see. However, I had no part in proving that. What I’m trying to say is—if you’re going to raise your estimation of my value, couldn’t you wait until after I’ve caught Crow, the Phantom Thief?”

After thinking for a while, the queen finally asked, “So you’re saying you’d like to continue being a detective for now?”

The queen was still able to follow what she was saying. Octavia nodded. “To be honest, if you asked me to manage a realm right now, it would only be a burden. I’m happy for my father to go on managing it in my stead.”

“Wh-Why, you—how dare you speak about me in that manner?!”

“Just as long as he doesn’t get in my way.”

Octavia’s father fell silent. He was rather busy, what with his face alternating between bright red and blue.

“More than anything, if I inherited the House of Reine just after being beaten by the Phantom Thief, I think my grandmother would turn in her grave.”

Silence now descended over the entire chamber. Jessie and Octavia’s father both looked as if they were holding ticking bombs; they frantically looked at the queen and Octavia in turn. Edward clenched both his hands in fists, rooted to the spot. Doubtless none of them spoke because they knew Octavia held their fates in her hands.

“Very well.” As if to restore order, the queen sounded her staff again. “In that case, let’s do the following.” Her tone of voice was severe. “Octavia de Reine, I name you the next Earl of Reine. However, you will only formally inherit the peerage if you manage to capture Crow, the Phantom Thief. In the event that you fail to capture him, then, just as Edward has insisted, the peerage will go to him, Jessie de Reine’s groom.”

Saved by the skin of their teeth, Jessie and Octavia’s father clasped their hands together. However, the queen’s stern voice interrupted their celebration.

“Edward. You are to be stripped of all the privileges you have attained as a prince for one year.”

“Eh...? Wh-Why?” It was Jessie who spoke up, her voice hysterical.

The queen responded evenly, “He misused our sheriffs and, far from contributing to the uncovering of the truth, confused the matter. Though his crimes are not as serious as Henry’s, he still must be dealt with. From now, for one year, you are not a prince or anything of the sort.”

“B-But, mother-in-law, Prince Edward did his best...”

“Know your place. Have some shame.”

This merciless remark from the queen froze the smile on Jessie’s face. Edward knelt to display his obedience. “As you wish...”

“Th-This can’t be,” breathed Jessie. “Then...what will become of our

marriage? Darling?”

“J-Jessie. Stop this at once!”

“Detective Octavia.” At the sound of the queen’s stately voice, Octavia turned to face her once more. “Do you find this satisfactory?”

“You have my gratitude, my queen.”

“Then there is nothing more to discuss, and I declare this audience to be at an end. We will make preparations to release Marquis Osvard at once.”

At this reminder, Octavia released all of a sudden that she had forgotten about Raven. *Where is he now?! He hasn’t run off, has he?!* And just what did he intend to do with the girl he’d carried off with him? Octavia hurriedly turned to leave.

“Sorry, but I must excuse myself! Please handle the details however you wish!”

“O-Octavia, wait! Don’t you care about what happens to your family?”

“That’s right, Sister! You’re on good terms with Marquis Osvard, aren’t you? That being the case...”

Before she opened the large door to the audience chamber, Octavia came to a halt. Then she slowly turned only her head to look back at Jessie. “The next time you do anything to Raven, I won’t let you off so easily.”

Octavia’s father had been looking at her with pleading eyes; Jessie, smiling wickedly; and Edward, still crestfallen—but at this, they all collectively gasped. Without waiting to hear Jessie’s response, Octavia promptly opened the door and stepped out of the chamber.

The tower where Raven was being held was not far from the palace. If Octavia ran, she should make it there in no time.

“I do wonder about your choice of words just now,” said Hat.

“Was there something wrong with what I said? I just think of him as my prey, and mine alone.”

“Is that how you think of him? Well, probably better not to announce it to

society at large...”

Octavia didn't know what Hat was so worried about, but right now, Raven came first. *Ah, right! I should check to see if there's any evidence that Raven left his cell!* As Octavia stepped outside, the sun had reached its apex in the sky. The brightness of its rays instilled hope in Octavia. Full of enthusiasm, she broke into a run.

To cut a long story short, there were surveillance images demonstrating that Raven had been in his cell for the entirety of the Phantom Thief's appearance.

“Thank you, Octavia! I was right to place my trust in you.”

Octavia said nothing.

“When you look at me like that, I can't help it if my heart pounds in my chest. That's the most fearsome and fascinating face you've shown me up until now.”

Octavia was still silent.

“By the way, I heard that Crow, the Phantom Thief, appeared during your audience with the queen. Is that true? Are you all right?”

“Don't you think we would have been better off not saving such a cheeky git as him?” wondered Hat.

Perhaps Hat was right. As Raven boldly stepped out of his iron-barred cell, a glowing smile on his face, Octavia fought the urge to punch him—just once!—and sighed.

That would be right, wouldn't it? There's no way he'd make such an elementary mistake as that.

Naturally, Raven, who wasn't carrying the music box, didn't have the girl with him either. He had nothing but the clothes on his back. Just what he had with him when he had been thrown in that cell, and nothing more. Of course, even if Octavia asked him what had become of the spoils of his theft, he would only play dumb. Though his abilities may have been achieved by forceful subversion of the rules, if he could use the Imperial Heirlooms, then there was very little he could not do. That meant that Octavia had simply been sent on a wild goose

chase, didn't it? A feeling welled up in Octavia that her efforts had been wasted, and her shoulders slumped.

"I wish you'd answer my question," prompted Raven.

"I'm just glad to see that you're all right."

"As this is such a rare occasion, might I request something with a little more emotional impact? Like a kiss, to mark our reunion?"

Octavia ignored Raven and began descending the stairs to the tower.

"What came of the audience with the queen?"

She continued to ignore him.

"Octavia?"

"If it's the House of Reine you're asking about, I am to inherit it, on the condition that I capture Crow, the Phantom Thief."

"Ohh?" Raven lowered his voice, following after Octavia. Without any warning, Octavia had been selected as guarantor for Raven's release from jail, so she had no choice but to accompany him until they were out of the tower.

"Speaking only of the outcome, we have more or less maintained the status quo. Nothing will change. Only, my family might quiet down a little, and for one year, Edward will be stripped of his rank as prince."

"My, oh, my. But why was your appointment to the peerage made contingent on the capture of the Phantom Thief?"

"Because I want to break his legs and make him take responsibility for his actions."

"It sounds like what you really want to say is that you intend to capture Crow and make him your husband."

"Huh? Why would I want to do that?"

"Hmm, so that's not what you want..."

Octavia stepped outside the tower, leaving Raven behind. He seemed to have a lot on his mind. After he'd filled out the simple paperwork for his discharge and exited the tower himself, he found Octavia standing in front of him, her

hands on her hips.

“Don’t try any other funny business. It’s time for you to go home.”

“Let me see you home first.”

“No need. I’m tired, so I’ll be going home myself. Don’t follow me.” Octavia had no interest in being led on another wild goose chase by Raven. After making her parting remarks, Octavia turned her back to Raven to walk away, but after a few steps she heard his voice again.

“I’ve decided to employ a little girl I happened to come across. Consider it a small act of charity. She’s a rare black-haired girl.” Octavia came screeching to a halt, and without thinking, looked over her shoulder. Raven grinned. “I wouldn’t want you jumping to any wrong conclusions, so I thought I should let you know before you meet her.”

“What conclusions did you think I would jump to?”

“I was worried you might mistakenly think that I was being unfaithful to you.”

“As if I would think that. In the first place, what do you mean by ‘unfaithful’? It’s almost as if you think we’re a couple.”

“It seems that something terrible happened to this girl, and she doesn’t speak much. But just hearing her say ‘thank you’ once nearly moved me to tears.”

Raven was talking about the young girl he had taken with him, the one who couldn’t speak. In between sighs, Hat said, “He must have mended her voice box. There’s definitely a tool we haven’t registered yet that could do that. He really does do as he pleases...”

An unregistered Heirloom meant one that Octavia had not yet discovered, which also meant that she couldn’t yet use it. She would rather that Raven didn’t take it upon himself to use such Heirlooms, but in this specific case—she probably ought to admit that he had done a good deed.

“Is that right? There really is no telling what you might do next,” said Octavia.

“There’s no telling with you, either,” said Raven with a smile, approaching Octavia one step at a time.

Octavia leaned away from him slightly. “Wh-What do you want? Do we have

anything left to talk about?”

“I don’t remember my parents’ faces.” This admission struck Octavia like a bolt from the blue. “I have no memory of anything besides a life spent in desperation, doing whatever it took to win my freedom. That’s why I find it strange that I still stand before you, that I haven’t run away yet.”

The sun was in Octavia’s eyes, so she couldn’t quite make out Raven’s expression. It seemed to her that he might be smiling, but he also might have looked troubled. *He isn’t lying*, she thought. But it still might be a trap, so she was wary.

“Haven’t you only stuck around...for the fun of it, or some such reason?”

“That might be it. But the truth is that I don’t really know. Therefore, I’d like to make a request of the detective.”

Raven had come so close that their bodies were almost touching. She pushed back against his chest. “Y-You’re too close, Raven.”

“Detective Octavia.” The movement of his lips as he spoke her name was seductive. Considering all that had just occurred, this was all the more incongruous. But she couldn’t tear her eyes away from him. After all, he was being sincere. His hazel eyes were clearly troubled. His face was not covered by a mask right now, so she couldn’t help but notice.

“I want you to uncover my true identity, the one even I don’t know,” Raven whispered in Octavia’s ear.

She opened her eyes again. There was a click deep in her heart, where her wishes and his request meshed together perfectly like a pair of cogs.

“What will be my compensation?”

“My salary as your assistant. I’ll even throw in some sweets for you to enjoy at work.”

Not a bad deal.

“No, this clearly won’t do! Isn’t it obvious?! He’s just trying to extract information from you!” cried Hat.

“I’m a detective,” Octavia said after a pause. “I won’t be fooled.”

“That’s right, Octavia! Now that I think about it, if you can steal back the emergency activation key from this scoundrel, then the case will be done and dusted!”

“I have no intention of fooling anyone,” said Raven.

“Just how are you able to tell such bold lies?! I’m actually impressed!” blurted out Hat.

“My first priority is to catch Crow, the Phantom Thief!”

Raven could only blink in response. Hat was also silent.

Octavia stared back earnestly at Raven. “Only then can I focus on your case. Isn’t that right?”

“Ah... Yes. Well, I...suppose?”

“That’s right. It’s pointless for you to try and sneak in ahead of him. I will not let him get away.” Octavia held her head high, full of confidence.

Raven, his expression suddenly sober, murmured, “I wasn’t expecting that reaction.”

“Neither was I,” muttered Hat. “Who knew this good-for-nothing was so inflexible?”

“But don’t worry. I still accept your request.” *I’ll take my compensation, too. It’s win-win. I almost feel like the world is on my side.*

With the wind blowing against her face and soft earth under her feet, Octavia smiled. She now knew what it was that she wished for.

“I, too, want to know everything there is to know about you.”

She was also sure that one day, she would understand why the man before her had just stopped breathing. The thought of learning this filled her with excitement.

“This concludes our negotiations. I look forward to continuing to work with you, Raven.”

“...”

“Ah, that’s right. I have to say thank you to Ashton as well. He gave me some

useful information. I'd like to stay in his good books from now on, as I continue to pursue Crow, the Phantom Thief. The police are an essential source of information for a detective, after all."

Eliza must be worried, too, Octavia thought. She would make her report to Eliza and, while she was at it, ask her to see that Ashton would be promoted. Everything was just getting started.

Octavia held her head high, but Hat, sitting atop it, looked weary. "In my omniscience and omnipotence, one thing has finally become clear to me. This is not going to work out well."

"I guess I really don't understand you after all," said Raven, smiling sheepishly.

Octavia had never seen him wear such an expression. She could hear an involuntary pounding in her own chest; in a hurry, she turned her back to him. Then, only after she'd taken a deep breath, she turned to face him once more.

"So you say. But even I can't say that I truly understand myself. Isn't that true for everyone?"

"I guess so. Now that you mention it, you, too, are a bundle of mysteries to me."

"Would you like to try solving them? Go ahead. I'll catch the Phantom Thief, so you can work on that."

She still didn't know the first thing about him. So she wanted to know. She backed away from Raven—one step, then another, then a third step.

Then, at last, she threw down the gauntlet between herself and the one who still dwelt deep in his heart.

"Just try and steal my heart, Phantom Thief."

The thing I want to know most is what you'll do after hearing that. Spinning away from Raven a final time, Octavia set forth, with Raven following after her a moment later. She decided to do him the favor of not turning to see his expression this time. She had some pity in her heart, after all.

They could not help but pursue each other's mysteries. They hoped to

uncover everything. They knew full well what to call a trap such as this, even as it continued to ensnare them, ever still more inexorably. But it wouldn't be any fun to solve such a puzzle so quickly!

The sun was still high in the sky. There was still plenty of time until the silhouettes of the detective and queen, and the assistant and Phantom Thief, would fade into the night.

EPISODE 3.5

How nostalgic, I thought, looking at the lipstick, with its rich color of blood. From the vaulted ceiling hung many sparkling chandeliers. The marbled floor had been polished diligently, so that it reflected the dancers twirling upon it almost like a mirror—so that if I looked down, I would end up dizzy.

I was in a ballroom, a place of opulent socialization. The sound of voices, gossiping and bargaining, floated into the air and scattered like a shower of flower petals.

“I hear this year’s vintage is particularly fine. I can’t wait to taste it.”

“Say, do you know her? That lady over there.”

“Indeed. I’ve heard that of late she has been extremely prosperous. She even looks younger, in her face and her clothes.”

I, Raven L. Osvard, listened intently. The words I overheard were barbed.

“Perhaps you might call it sophistication? But that woman’s daughter is already of an age to make her debut.”

“I’ve heard that she’s a handful to be around. I’ve heard that even her servants are constantly in a daze!”

“It seems a young noble has been sending her flowers, one after the other. The fellow in question doesn’t look too bad to me, but, like every such night, I can’t tell who she has her sights set on...”

“Shh, she’s coming this way.”

“Lord Osvard!”

I could sense the wives and daughters of nobles who had been nattering away behind me gasp collectively. I turned to face the one who had greeted me with a grin on my face. It was those vivid red lips that had called me, but it seemed now that I could smell the heavy fragrance of wine. *Ah, I imagine this alone would leave a normal human intoxicated.*

“If you wouldn’t mind, might we speak over here?”

I do not detest flatterers, actually. It is people who live their lives without ever giving flattery that I dislike. I think them arrogant.

But this—the color of her lips—this would not do. A red so vivid that it threatened to blot out my retinas. The intoxicating feeling they imparted might have convinced another man that he was in love.

“Your lipstick is lovely.”

“Indeed, it really is. I only recently acquired it.”

“From where did you purchase it?”

“My, interested, are we? Well, let me see. Where was it...again...?”

She had suddenly fallen into a daze. This lady was most likely just a victim—it was only lipstick, after all. Even so, it was lipstick that could grant wishes. I knew it well. I had seen it before. After all, I had once worn it myself, using it to transform into a young girl when I’d had my picture taken.

The lipstick was magical, able to completely change one’s appearance. It was one of the Imperial Heirlooms that even the angels had not been able to wipe out entirely.

Could it be that the Heirlooms were scattered across the earth? That might have been the best way to dispose of them. There was no upper limit to a human’s ambition. Even when warned of the danger, some humans would still try to get their hands on them. The angels’ cover-up had capitalized on that weakness. The thought suddenly crossed my mind: if I exposed this scheme, I wondered, what would happen? I wasn’t thinking of revenge or anything so lofty as that. Something simpler, more innocent. I would call it playfulness.

It was around this time that I’d become used to the rank of marquis that I had so skilfully obtained. In fact, I’d begun to grow tired of it. There was still no sign that His Highness, the queen’s brother, had noticed me yet. He probably thought I had died. Angels can be surprisingly foolish.

That being the case, I thought that starting a new game wouldn’t be too bad. *I’ve got it—what about becoming some sort of phantom thief?* Of all things, a

phantom thief who targets Demonic Heirlooms. An act of direct provocation against the angels.

That sounds like fun. They're always that simple, really, the thoughts that inspire people to embark on a new course of action.

It was the same sort of thinking that led me to become Octavia's assistant. At least, I believe it was. It sounded fun. That alone was enough. The pursuit of nothing but pleasure, ephemeral and unproductive. Without such a stimulus, I cannot truly feel that I am free, that I am alive. So, of course, it wasn't as if I had any objective in mind.

"Just try and steal my heart, Phantom Thief."

Receiving such words as these is...

"So troublesome," I murmured.

"What's the matter, Raven?" asked Octavia now. "That was sudden. If something is troubling you, I'll happily discuss it with you. For a fee."

"Thank you for your consideration. You're a truly dependable employer. But this is a problem I have to deal with myself."

"I see," said Octavia, returning to her paperwork. I was dissatisfied with how easily she had withdrawn from the conversation, but I was also aware of how unreasonable my excuse must have sounded. I, too, returned to my work opening mail.

Then I chanced upon a particular envelope, and my eyes opened wide. "Octavia, it's from Reine Manor—from your father."

"Just open it for now. And see what's inside. Thanks."

"Are you sure? It might be private."

"I don't mind. It's too late to keep you out of my family matters."

Did she say this out of her faith in me or her lack of concern with her family? I decided to take it as the former; that was more favorable to me, after all. With a twist of my paper knife, I opened the envelope and ran my eyes across the letter.

“What does it say? Ah, but I’m sure it’s another letter I won’t quite understand...”

I couldn’t prevent my voice from becoming lower. “He says he has more suitors to introduce to you.”

I heard another voice respond at the same time, which said, “He *what*? That rubbish family of yours again!”

It could’ve been that the hat had cottoned on to the fact that I could hear him, now. Probably he was hollering with the intention of provoking a reaction. Either way, I decided to treat this as an auditory hallucination.

Octavia’s hand, which had been writing with a quill pen, froze. She sighed.

“Not again...”

“Again?” I repeated thoughtlessly, dreading what I might learn. I tried to convey that this was the first I’d heard about any new suitors.

But Octavia only shrugged. “This is the third time he’s sounded me out since the start of this month. I’ll happily ignore it.”

“Are you sure? You won’t even ask who your prospective suitors are?”

“They’re all the same.”

“I might be misremembering, but I thought you believed in marrying strategically.” What had caused a note of sarcasm to slip into my voice was the fact that the candidates Octavia’s father had offered up were all of quite high standing. Though I wouldn’t have called them men of the very highest pedigree, all things considered, Octavia’s father had nevertheless made quite a good effort, it seemed. It wouldn’t have been strange for Octavia, set as she was on a strategic marriage, to seize upon any one of them.

This was the same father who hadn’t wanted Octavia to make a societal debut. I never would have imagined that he would come to her with an offer like this. Perhaps he had finally acknowledged the fact that Octavia would inherit his peerage, contingent as this was on her capturing Crow, the Phantom Thief. This was a ploy to ensure that she at least married a man he could support.

Come to think of it, I had heard a rumor that Edward was now working on the ground. Octavia's father would probably have to resort to someone else for his other daughter, too.

"Well, in the first place, your income is higher, isn't it?"

My mind had been so occupied with these strange concerns that I took a while to respond. "Hm? What? Income?"

"What I mean is, there's no room for comparison, is there?" Octavia looked at me with an expression as if to say, *Don't you get it?*

I couldn't help but think I was being stupid. *No, wait a moment. No, this is not a cause for celebration.* Presently, Octavia—without the slightest hint of embarrassment—returned to her work. She had given me as much consideration as she would when comparing two items in a shop, one in each hand, and judging one of them to be better value.

To be sure, I was a high-value prospect. Given my income, my title, my reputation, and my looks, young noblewomen around my age would surely line up around the block. In short, Octavia had finally realized that fact. That was all. In other words, this was nothing for me, a believer in marrying for love, to celebrate.

No, I suppose it's good that she's at least become aware of that. I may have managed to slip past her defenses. Or have I?

Could it be that those words of hers—*just try and steal my heart*—were not the charming invitation I had taken them for, but a proclamation of defiance? A declaration that I would never manage that feat? I became aware of an icy feeling in the bottom of my heart.

"She is formidable..." Her assistant's resentful muttering did not seem to reach the ears of the detective, enthralled in her work as she was. Touching the tip of her quill to her lips, she pondered something. Though I had already touched those lips twice, there was now not a hint of eroticism between us.

But—challenge accepted. Isn't stealing the unstealable what makes me the Phantom Thief? What fun is there in stealing treasure from an unlocked chest?

"Raven. The figures on this invoice are wrong—" Octavia broke off. "Raven?"

What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, sorry. I was lost in thought. I'll be right there." With a smile worthy of an assistant, I rose to my feet.

I had slipped a letter of announcement into her opened mail. Almost like a love letter.

That night, the Phantom Thief flitted across the sky. This time, to steal the detective's heart.

Afterword

Nice to meet you—or otherwise, good to see you again. My name is Sarasa Nagase. On this occasion, I humbly thank you for reading this work of mine. This story was reworked and retitled from a work that was first posted and serialized on the web. The parts from Raven, the male love interest’s perspective, are all original to this volume, and the main text has been revised and expanded extensively, to the extent that I think even those who read the web edition will find something to enjoy about it.

This story once bore the title “The Young Lady Detective Will Not Make Deductions, Really,” but I never imagined it would be turned into a book. I’d only knocked it out to serve my own proclivities, since with the promise of a phantom thief as the male love interest, I could live quite happily on nothing but white rice.

Now, seeing it become a book—complete with gorgeous illustrations—is almost like being in a dream. I really hadn’t thought anything through at first, so when I finally began the work of rewriting it for print publication, there were many moments when I held my head in anguish. But if there is anyone else out there who enjoys it, who also likes the pairing of a detective and a phantom thief, then I will be satisfied.

Now for the acknowledgments. Firstly, Hatipisuwan-sensei. I am so thankful for the gorgeous illustrations you provided, despite your busy schedule. Just seeing your depiction of my Phantom Thief love interest is enough for me to feel happy that I’m alive.

Next, the editor in charge. Thank you for always dealing with me politely. As this was my first paperback, I did not know what was expected of me, and I believe I caused you trouble, but I enjoyed working with you very much!

I must also thank profusely the proofreaders, everyone in the editing department, the designers and marketers, and everyone who participated in the creation of this book.

Furthermore, it is only because of the support of everyone who read the story while it was still in its web edition that Octavia and Raven can now be found in the pages of a book. Thank you so much for your encouragement.

Finally, to everyone who was kind enough to pick up this book—what did you think of Octavia and Raven’s story? Hopefully, I will be able to write the continuation of their story. Until then, I pray that we will meet again.

Respectfully yours,

Sarasa Nagase

Crow the Phantom Thief

"If you manage to catch me,
I won't mind telling you."

Octavia

"Just who are you?"

Ashton

Raven

“You must be Inspector Baker,
the one who’s in charge of this
investigation.”

“If you want to play detective, can’t you do it
somewhere else, young lady? Me, I’m working
here. This isn’t a game!”

“I am Octavia de Reine.
I’m a detective.”



Bonus Short Story

The All-Knowing, All-Powerful Hat Makes His Deduction

Hat was an all-knowing, all-powerful artifact. To put it another way, he was the administrator of the Imperial Heirlooms, which were themselves crammed with all of mankind's wisdom. As he was no less intelligent than a human—on the contrary, he was more intelligent—nothing should be able to escape his notice.

Least of all an obvious trap like this.

“Going shopping with Ann, she says. Even though I would have been quite willing to help her myself.” The man who sat elegantly on the sofa was gazing at the door. He wasn't looking at Hat, who rested on the table in front of him. Indeed, he comported himself as if he were only talking to himself. “Though I suppose the fact that she left me here to watch the place means that she trusts me.”

But his tone of voice betrayed the truth. He was definitely speaking so that Hat would overhear him.

“I'm sure she only thought that it would be ridiculous to remain on her guard around you,” Hat replied. “Don't get carried away.”

“Even so, there's nothing to do here. Perhaps I should set up some sort of surprise for her.”

“How old are you?”

“When she's startled, perhaps she'll misattribute her excitement. That could be to my advantage. When she feels her heart pound, she might mistake it for love. Shall I try it?”

“Are you stupid?”

“But nothing promising comes to mind... I feel like Octavia would brush that sort of thing off surprisingly easily. Ah, it's so boring to be left alone,” said

Raven, before turning his head to look at Hat.

Raven was pretending he could not hear Hat, but Hat felt as if their eyes had met. A brief moment of tension passed.

Then Raven reached out toward Hat. Before Hat knew what was happening, he found himself placed on top of Raven's head. Hat was currently in the guise of Octavia's quintessential detective's accessory, the deer-stalker hat.

"If only this would allow me to know what Octavia was thinking."

"You can't tell? You must be even dimmer than I thought."

"Oh, my, this hat is so small. I wonder if it'll stretch when I tug on it. Ha ha ha! Or will it tear?" Gripping him tightly, Raven began to stretch Hat's brim out.

"As for my good-for-nothing detective, her head is probably still filled with thoughts of you—"

Raven let go of Hat suddenly, as if his hands had been burned.

Pretending to simply flutter downwards, Hat alighted neatly on top of the table once more.

Hat was all-knowing and all-powerful. Therefore he understood the meaning behind the man's expression, as his face turned red and he covered his mouth with a hand.

"Did you really think it would be that easy?"

Raven's expression stiffened, but he seemed to have enough self control left to stop himself from hurling abuse at Hat.

"You fool," Hat went on, "of course it wouldn't be that easy. Just who do you take our queen for? You spineless coward—you, who cannot even begin to confess your *own* feelings."

Raven didn't offer a retort to this either.

"You're out of her league. Know your place, Phantom Thief."

Perhaps Raven felt he couldn't talk back. After all, it was taken for granted that Hat and Raven could not converse.

On top of that, Octavia—whom he had keenly awaited—had now returned.

“Raven, we managed to find some good tea leaves. We bought milk too.”

Raven could do nothing but frantically feign a smile. “Welcome back, Octavia. Would you like me to make the tea?” He greeted her with his usual calm expression. Hat rather admired the speed of this transformation.

“Yes, would you? Ann is just handling the rest of the bags for me, so let’s all have tea together once she’s done.”

All together. At these words, Raven looked slightly disappointed, but he said nothing. As garrulous as he had been in front of Hat under the pretense of talking to himself, he once again fell flat on his backside at the final hurdle. The next time Octavia told him to wait here while she went out on an errand, he would surely torment himself in the same futile way.

“My, how pitiful,” muttered Hat.

“Hat? Did something happen between you and Raven?”

“No. How did it go? You were going to buy that fellow a gift in place of his salary, weren’t you?”

“W-Well... The truth is, I couldn’t decide, so I thought I’d try again next time I’m out shopping.” Octavia smiled wryly in an attempt to smooth things over.

Hat was having none of that. “I think he’d be delighted no matter what you got him, like a puppy.”

“Ann said the same thing, but shouldn’t I want to get him something amazing?”

“What is this strange sense of pride? Good grief... Why does everyone around me insist on wasting their time so?”

Hat’s criticism left Octavia in a huff, but he was sure that her spirits would lift as soon as she drank the tea that Raven had just brought into the room. Once she had, all her worries—and his, too—would be swept away.

Good grief, what a waste of time. But the all-knowing, all-powerful Hat knew the truth. This waste of time was what people called love.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

The Disowned Queen's Consulting Detective Agency: Volume 1

by Sarasa Nagase

Translated by Joshua Douglass-Molloy Edited by Lyn Hall

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 Sarasa Nagase Illustrations © 2022 Hatipisuwan Cover illustration by Hatipisuwan All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Earth Star Entertainment This English edition is published by arrangement with Earth Star Entertainment, Tokyo English translation © 2023 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: February 2023

Premium E-Book